

**The Adventures of**  
**Button**  
**Broken Tail**



**Richard W. Leech, M.D.**  
**Illustrated by: Cathy Chouteau**



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# Preface

This book written in simple English prose with the fullest intention of entertaining the reader. However, do not fear to pick up a Webster's Dictionary; it is an incredibly fascinating book, a journey in itself. Read The Adventures of Buttons with your parents, share it, and enjoy.

There are a very few animals not native to Oklahoma. I have strayed into the world of fantasy fiction with the introduction of Sara, but I still like to go adventuring, too. All of the dogs who join Buttons I have known personally. They were and remain grand, in my memories.

tio,

RWIL





# Ssserek's End

The small, black figure negotiated the last of the back porch steps in a controlled fall, executing a forward roll in her haste to reach the fence. Winding her way through spring-fresh daffodils, she reached her goal only to stop and cautiously look back. No one was to be seen, and she bent down, seeking the small hole in the soft dirt she had begun the day before. With hardly a glance, she began to dig, bits and pieces of dirt flying furiously backwards along her rotund body. It took but a moment for her to dig a hole big enough to permit her to push her long-tapered snout outside the confines of the wooden fence.



She worked her way forward and glanced at both sides before emerging into the field that seemed to go forever all about her.

She snorted, a quiet, soft snort to be sure, but it cleared her nose which worked quickly to pick any strange or mysterious scents. Finding none, she bound forward. Free at last, Buttons was again into *the* field, seeking new horizons and distant adventure.



Her stout legs rapidly carried her forward along the barely perceptible paths of the rabbits and mice that inhabited the stretch of fence along her masters' backyard. The day was bright, the sky clear of living creatures. Only distant cirrus clouds passed far overhead. Buttons paid no attention to them for her nose was close to the ground, sniffing to the left and then to the right. Small gouts of dust swirled into the air with each snort. Strange and alluring scents filled her nose with the passage of the early morning's activities. How she would have liked to investigate each of them, but her Jon waited in his room while she greeted the day for the first time. Jonnie was wrestling with a new shirt for school, and was gathering his books and paraphernalia because the school bus would be along in minutes. Buttons has no other thought than the odors and drifting breezes that brought so much information to her.

She continued her race through the brown thatch of grasses that reached above her shoulders. Her pace was fast and her passage swift. Where she went made no difference for she was seeking whatever the field had to offer for fun and adventure.

The field sloped gradually from southwest to northeast toward the old and rusting fence of the graveyard which lay partially within the field. A tall line of ancient oaks split the graveyard into an ancient portion and newer sector. The heavy branches of the oaks protected the greater portion of the graveyard and provided homes for innumerable birds and four-legged creatures. These latter were Button's goal this late morning. But for the

moment, she was content just frolicking along. Her world was in her nose, and the many new and enticing odors that reached her keen, though young, senses totally blinded her to the large sinuous form before her.

The rope-like body was large, even for its kind. Button's headlong rush was quickly detected and the creature's passage through the tall, dry grass slowed but rather in anticipation or curiosity was not evident.

Buttons, of course, paid no attention. She gamboled along at her ground-eating pace totally oblivious to the fate that awaited her. Her passage was abruptly halted as she bowled into the form before her. A loud grunt greeted her as she unceremoniously sat back on her haunches.

"Wow," she exclaimed as she looked at her roadblock. "Boy, are you big!" Moving forward, she peered over the large, round back. "Hey, you're even shorter than me." As she moved toward the head that towered above her, her nose was sniffing along the ground, examining the newcomer more closely than many had in the past. "Hey, where's your feet? I can't find them. I have four, you see." Buttons rolled over on her back to the amazement of her new acquaintance. Her forelimbs were limb, and her small black feet kicked slowly in the air.

"I do see, but . . ." He got no further as Buttons immediately regained her feet and stood on her hind legs, the right forepaw bracing against her new friend, while the left leg hung limply.

"Gee, you even longer than Shadrack, the water moccasin. Do you know Shadrack?"

Her sinuous friend began to open his mouth, when Buttons continued and interrupted, "Hey, you know, you're not the same all over. Pretty colors, too. I'm only black, well, really, shiny and black. My hair goes with my nose, you know. Color-coordinated, that's what my boy calls it. What's your name?"

"Ssssserek, the mag . . ."

"Sssssso nicccce." Buttons giggled at her own joke as she launched herself over Sssereck's broad back. Four legs hung momentarily in the air

as her round belly rested on the top of Ssserek's back. Then, with a whoosh of air, she slid to the ground on the opposite side.

Peering down the long, smooth flank, she exclaimed, "Wow, I bet it's a day's journey around you."

"That's nicely put, young lady." He muttered in a low tone, "Must be getting old, I'm repeating my self."

"Well, it's only the truth, you know," Buttons responded as she marched forward to place herself squarely before Ssserek. Ssserek's head swayed to and fro a foot above her. "Hey, can't you lower your head? I can't see you very well." Buttons sat up as Ssserek's nose began to approach her, then slowly rolled onto her side. "My sit-up still slides to the side, you see."

Ssserek's soft, sibilant hiss made her scramble to her feet more quickly than normal. "Hey, I'm not making fun of you, really. Besides, you're really very nice to look at."

Ssserek's head was by now swaying just above Button's head. The broad snout pointed side to side as his slender, red tongue darted back and forth as he maneuvered to better view Buttons.

His eyes began to whirl as he measured the small four-legged creature before him. "Hum, humm, hummm. Bigger than a mouse, but appears harder than the bunnies. Hummmm." His eyes whirled more rapidly and red flecks appeared in them.

"You have pretty brown eyes, just like me, you know. Please stop moving so much." Buttons again tried to sit up, and when that failed, she stood for a second so that she might get a better view.

"What kind of animal are you?" Ssserek's head was by now only inches from Buttons's nose. "I stick my tongue out to pant, you know. But yours goes all the time, doesn't it?"

Ssserek's quick answer came before Buttons could continue. "I am of the great snake clan, and I do not pant. My tongue tells me much about the world around me, and it tells me you are a very fine . . ."

He hesitated, sighed, then continued as Buttons interposed a “Well.”

“A very nice young lady,” he sighed again as his thoughts were brought back to the young dog before him. “Oh, well.”

Buttons looked at him expectantly. “Gee whiz, your eyes aren’t going around and around anymore. That was very pretty, too, you know.”

“Yes, I know, but then . . .”

“Will you be my friend?” Buttons was lying on her back, twisting to and fro as she stretched and scratched her back. Flipping upright, she continued unabashedly, “You’re really nice to look at, so tall and short, as it were. You know, there’s something moving back there.”

She was gazing intently toward Ssserek’s furthest component. “What happened to your legs? You know you didn’t say, and it certainly is, well not odd, but definitely different. You see what I mean?”

“I will be your friend. I am glad you appreciate my appearance. Many don’t. And yes, I am both tall and short.” Ssserek reared up to his greatest height, and gazed serenely down on the small creature before him.

“It is a very old tale,” Ssserek smiled for his own pun before continuing, “that is told within the snake clan of a time, a very long time ago. We had legs then, but . . .”

Ssserek dropped so that his left eye focused closely on Buttons’s right. “But—it is told by those who have no love for us—they say we lost our legs because of something a great, great ancestor, many times removed, did to people. I dismiss such cavil comments as mere hearsay, and you must pay no attention to it. We, the many clans of snakes, prefer the truth. We move with stealth and silence; we are subtle, as we are supple,(to himself, nice alliteration, don’t you think), and we are wise for we hold the histories of many clans in our thoughts.”

Buttons had lost interest through this lengthy peroration and was again watching Ssserek’s nether part.

“There is something there. I did see it. Look!” Buttons tapped Ssserek with a forepaw.

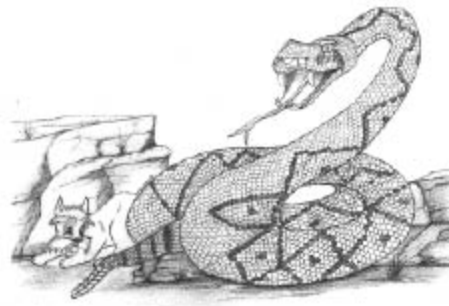
He swayed to his words with his head cocked to one side.

“You see?” Buttons poked him again.

Ssserek tried to continue, “My great-great-great grandfather, ten times removed, once . . .” The rippling of muscles reached his head, and he looked down.

“Wha . . . wha . . . what is it now, little one?”

“There. You see. It’s moving and I hear noise.” Buttons was fairly jumping up and down against Ssserek’s side. “You see?”



“Yes, of course, I see. It’s always there.”

“Well, what is it?”

“Humph! I’d thought you would know.”

“Why should I? I’ve never seen one before.”

“Hardly seems possible, but you’ve probably passed it innumerable times while asking questions of some poor soul.”

“I really don’t think so.” Buttons looked up at Ssserek quizzically. “No, I don’t really think so. It’s much too fascinating for that, don’t you agree?”

“But, of course. I am rather attached to it, you know.” Ssserek grinned out the side of his mouth. “Really, you know, that’s rather good. I’ll have to run that by badger one of these days.”

Fairly hopping in one place, Buttons paid scant attention to Ssserek’s comments for her own world had been reduced to his tail. “What does it do?”

“Well, well, you see, it rattles. But then, what would a rattle do but rattle? It is becoming.”

“You always have it with you?”

“What?” Ssserek lowered his head and gazed intently at Buttons. It was not all that easy, the gazing that is, for Buttons was bouncing from one forepaw to the next. “Well,” Ssserek thought, “at least she is jousting. I think.” “I just told you, I’m very attached to it.”



“And, well, you should be. Can I go look at it? It won’t hurt, will it? Does it always make that much noise? Does it keep you awake at night? Does it play?”

Before Ssserek could respond, Buttons was off, racing down Ssserek’s side. He muttered to himself at such cavalier treatment. “Yes, you can look at it. It has never hurt me. And no, it doesn’t always make so much noise, though I’ve gotten rather accustomed to it. And no, it doesn’t keep me awake at night. Why should it? And good heavens, NO!” Ssserek jerked his head backways just as Buttons leaped.

Needle-sharp teeth sank into Ssserek’s tail just before the rattle, sending writhing muscular convulsions racing forward.

His head snapped upward and back, fangs glistening in the morning air. Buttons let go as the rattle whipped to and fro, sending gouts of dust skyward.

“This is great.” Her words came in the midst of her joyous efforts to once again capture the rattles which now eluded her best leaps.

Ssserek’s fangs stopped a fraction of an inch short of Buttons’s round, black posterior. “Good lord!,”he exclaimed. “What now?”

With her head down, Buttons lay in wait for each passage of the rattle. With each passage of the tail, she would leap, snarling at her prey, grunting with the effort. Back and forth. Up and down. Worse than leaves in a whirlwind, her small body rose into the air in swift, quick jerks, her teeth snapping ever more closely. The motion began to make Ssserek dizzy, watching the two tearing the grass into shreds in their frenzied efforts.

“My God, I’m getting positively giddy. I’m too old for this. I’m tired.” And Ssserek rested.

“Ahhhhhhhhhh.” The throat of snakes was not made for such verbal abuse, but the only other recourse was entirely too lethal, though Ssserek was sorely tempted as sharp, stabbing pains once again assailed his brain.

Ssserek's blunt snout thudded into Buttons's rear, sending her spinning head over heels through the grass. "Whewwww! Hey, that's fun. Can we do it again?" Bouncing to her feet, she braced herself for another rush, only to find herself looking squarely into the face of Ssserek, whose tail was ringed with white and black. It was now rapidly sidling away from another painful confrontation.

"We will think about it."

Buttons was by now moving alongside Ssserek's head. "Open."

"Wha . . . wha . . . what?"

"Open, you know, your mouth." Buttons's nose was nearly touching Ssserek.

Tilting his head ever so slightly, Ssserek slowly allowed a small slit to appear.

"No, no. Wider." Buttons was bouncing up and down on her short front legs, attempting to get even closer. Again, Ssserek allowed more space to appear between his lips. "Come on," Buttons insisted. "More."

As his upper fangs dropped into view, they were greeted with "Ha, I thought so. They have holes in them. Do they hurt? Boy, are they big. Can I touch them?" Opening her own mouth, she continued, "See, Igateethtoo," and with a snap, she grinned, "But no holes."

Each time Ssserek moved his mouth aside, Buttons would move closer, until Ssserek was forced to raise his head out of reach. "No, no, my little sister, you must not touch. Ever." He fixed his eyes on Buttons who sat with a puff of dirt.

"Well, but why not?" She dropped her head and the hurt was evident in her voice.

Ssserek took in a deep breath as he watched Buttons with both amusement and deep understanding. "They move, you see, and they might hurt you if we weren't careful. I don't want that. Do you?"

“No, of course not. You can touch mine if you wish. They’re sharp, though.”

Ssserek chuckled, “I believe you. Tell you what, let us never use our teeth in anger and in . . .” He looked back towards his tail. “Ummm, well, never in anger or to intentionally hurt. All right?”

“That’s neat,” Buttons responded, the entire matter forgotten as she gazed with some longing in the direction of Ssserek’s gaze.

“Boy, do you see that?” A small hushed voice broke into their contemplation.

Ssserek whirled around, whipping his head. The newcomer. Rare it was indeed when anyone could sneak up on him, and the thought that it had happened caused his rattles to whirl like a hornet’s nest under attack.

“Whoa, Ssserek, you know we don’t taste good. Golly, I didn’t mean to bother you.” The voice was that of Isaiah, the skunk, and his tail twitched convulsively, torn between the great desire to depart the vicinity of Ssserek and the novelty of the scene before him.

Buttons, who had been standing against Ssserek’s smooth, glistening side, had slumped to the right haunch and sat, looking at the newcomer, with her left paw dangling at her side. What a scene!

Isaiah would repeat the tale many times in the future for no one had ever willingly put themselves within reach of Ssserek and his volatile temper.

The tip of Ssserek’s tongue was invisible as it flickered to and fro in the early morning sun. Then, it abruptly stopped, something it almost never did.

“Phew, you, my black-and-white friend, are welcome to approach. Downwind, of course, and I have mentioned that once before. You do remember?” His head dropped abruptly to directly confront Isaiah at his own level.

The sudden move sent the young skunk spinning backwards onto his tail. Whuffing, Isaiah regained his feet quickly. His composure only came later with due consideration of the situation.

“Yes, sir,” Isaiah respectfully replied. “But I didn’t expect to see Buttons so close, well, I mean, near, ah, with you, I mean. I forgot.”

“That’s because you’re a flibbertigibbit just like them birds!”

Beulah, the possum slowly sidled into the scene. “Good morning, your magnificence.”

Ssserek nodded in return as he raised himself to his most imposing height.

“And good morning to you, Mrs. Opossum. You’re out late, I see.”

“Like you, my fearsome eminence. The day appeared to be perfect for ambling in the field, what with all of the children asleep. But, you seem to be gathering all the young scatterbrains about you.”

“There she goes again.”

A very small, high-pitched voice appeared just above Ssserek’s head. “All that high and mighty stuff. Nauseating, I say.” Pip, with his wings a-blur as only hummingbirds can do, hovered just in front of Ssserek’s nose.

The flicking of his tongue matched Pip’s wings as Ssserek bent his gaze to the flashing green and gold of the small bird before him.

His humor coming to the fore, Ssserek smiled, “So, my slippery and garrulous young gadfly, Sasha, the milk snake did not find you in your nest last night?”

Ssserek’s chuckle was lost as Pip circled about his head in frenzied agitation. “What, what? Not nice, not nice. Joke not nice,” piped the flitting bird.

Ssserek’s smile was bad enough, his humor worse. “Come, come, my little gadabout. Sit. You’re making all of us dizzy just watching you.”

“Yes, please do,” came a chorus of voices from around them. By this time, Ssserek’s presence was known to many inhabitants of the Great Field. Chipmunk and squirrel, robin and blue jay, and even several field mice had gathered about, watching the unexpected activity.

The birds chirruped together, “Do sit, we so enjoy it.”

Pip, in sudden darting movements, moved about Ssserek’s head. Pip tilted side to side, and even upside down, the more carefully to inspect Ssserek and to gage his intention.

“Come, my huffy little hawk. It was only in jest.”

With a “Well, I forgive you this time,” Pip abruptly settled to Ssserek’s head. Fluffing his feathers, he haughtily surveyed his friends below. Of all the Great Field’s inhabitants, only Pip could touch Ssserek unscathed. Pip’s natural speed and maneuverability endowed him with an immunity no other could enjoy, given that he remained vigilant at all times. Pip flipped his iridescent wings to his back and stocked forward.

“Magnificent, truly unmatched.” With a sigh, he gazed serenely about him. With the barest of pauses—for a hummingbird, long indeed—he murmured to himself, “I really am.”

As Pip gazed at the world from his impressive height, the earth in front of Ssserek erupted. Mole stuck his head out of the soft, exploding red earth, piping in an irritated tone, “What, what’s going on? I was dozing when the earth started to shake something fierce. What’s this?” He moved, bumping into Ssserek’s broad body. Mole peered closely at the scaled form, “Hmm, most unusual, never seen anything like it. What is it?” he repeated himself to the world.

A small voice stuttered at some distance, “It’s Ss . . . Sss . . . Ssserek, you know, the snake.”

“Good creator of all animals, preserve me.” And suiting action to words, mole disappeared in a flurry of dirt.

Ignatius, a small, ragtag-of-a-ground squirrel, scratched himself unceremoniously. He paid scant heed to those sitting beside him and trying to get out of the way of flying hair. “You know, old mole can sure move when the spirit is upon him.” He cocked his head and looked impudently at Ssserek. “Well, snake, old boy, what do you think?”

Ssserek slowly measured the small squirrel in front of him. "I think your mother's last thought must have been one of relief. Bless her old bones." He burped ever so gently and nonchalantly tilted his head for a better view of the crowd now gathering.

Ignatius snickered, "Gave you indigestion, huh?" A runt, even among squirrels, he had learned to fend for himself at a very early age. Hence, there was little that was sacred to him, and one must pardon him for being an iconoclast, even in the presence of Ssserek. "Didn't know I knew, huh?" Ssserek was slow in responding, well, at least in so far as Ignatius was concerned. "Well, huh. Huh?"

"My least of friends," began Ssserek. The double-entendre caused him to pause, but only Buttons appeared particularly interested. Oh, well, he thought to himself, they are young. He began again, "My smallest . . ." No, that wouldn't do, not with Pip standing astride his left eye. "Look, Iggie." That really got Ignatius hopping up and down, his scraggly tail all a-fuzz with indignation. Thought that would get to him, Ssserek mused smugly to himself, but got no further.

Like the prow of a ship pushing ever-expanding waves to either side, Ribbon moved nonchalantly to sit before Ssserek. "Good afternoon, Ssserek, my renowned and rapacious snake of snakes. Iggie giving you any trouble?" Somewhat taken with herself because of the lovely alternating pattern of black and white stripes down her back, she delicately licked one paw.

"If you will move slightly to your right, my dear young lady, I could see your lovely stripes all the better."

"You mean you want her downwind," Ignatius piped in.

Ribbon haughtily regarded her tufted and tattered neighbor. "Really, rat, you take too much upon yourself."

Ignatius laughed, a short, barking cough. "Ah, ah, dear little posy. I'm not one to take on airs. Am I, Ssserek?"

“Aw, my little poseur. You are in rare feather today.” Ssserek looked back to where Buttons sat. She had hastily moved on Ribbon’s approach. “Well, little one, I see you have met our striped nosegay.”

“Well, if you mean a skunk, yes I have.”

“That bad? You’ll have to tell me about it one day.”

“Not now, please.” Buttons looked beseechingly at Ssserek. “It really was an awful time. And, well, everyone is here now. You see, don’t you?”

“I can imagine. I understand. I do, and we won’t.” Ssserek returned his gaze to Ribbon and the many inhabitants of the Great Field that now surrounded him. Truly it was a rare day.

I wonder, Ssserek thought. Our small black friend here certainly knows how to attract a crowd. Buttons sat against his side, unconsciously stretching herself. Well, it is a bit dusty today and she certainly has been busy. Next, you know . . .

Buttons rolled onto her back, arching herself side to side, sending dust clouds into the air until she was nearly masked by it.

“Does feel good, doesn’t it?” asked Ssserek.

“Well, I’m getting tired,” said Buttons from somewhere in the cloud. “It’s been a long day and I haven’t had my nap.” She sat up, her head sitting just above the dust. She looked around her. “Hi,” she shouted. “Boy, it’s good to see you.”

Ssserek smiled, for she had said little to the gathering. He started to say something to Ignatius when he became aware of the hush which had fallen on the many good animals of the Great Field. Following their rapturous gaze, he quickly looked backwards. Buttons was making her way up his tail until she stood before the coiled mound of his muscular form. First placing her right paw on one coil and then the left, she slowly bunched herself. Launching herself upward, she scrambled over the top. Falling into the bowl formed by Ssserek’s coils, she righted herself with some difficulty. A

puff of dirt-laden air escaped, and she rolled onto her back. Four paws stuck into the sky, and closing her eyes, she was instantly asleep.





The broad, blunt nose of a startled serpent was caught by surprise at the cool, sweet breath of each exhalation escaping from the soundly asleep Buttons.

“Well, well!” Ssserek exclaimed. “Well, I’ll be!”

“Hey, Ssserek.” The hushed squeak of Ignatius came from his side.

Ever alert even when among friends, Ssserek was caught totally off guard. First by the totally unexpected actions of Buttons and then by the proximity of Ignatius. His head began to whip around when he caught himself. He froze. Peeking at Buttons who slept without a care within his coils, Ssserek looked slowly down at the foolhardy, and brave, young squirrel. Never had any of the squirrel clan approached Ssserek so closely. He muttered to himself, but only to himself, for Ignatius stood frozen at his side.

“To be brave for a friend is one thing, my little friend. But do you mean to be here?”

Ignatius stuttered, and before answering, carefully measured the snake. The muscular bulk of Ssserek was startling at a distance. Up near, it was absolutely breathtaking, well, almost. Ignatius was built of sterner stuff than most had given him credit for. He was also cleverer than such a small bit a fluff should be. He gambled all.

“Well, you know how it is, Ssserek. Right, Ssserek, old friend?” The last was a bit daring, but from where Ignatius stood, Ssserek had barely so much as breathed after looking down at the somnolent figure of Buttons.

Softly, Ssserek answered, “No, little rat, I don’t. But I’m sure you will enlighten me.” The serpent’s nose very slowly approached Ignatius. When within a scant inch, he again whispered, “But I’m sure you will tell me. Old, old friend.”

The nearness of the great snake caused a slight tremor to creep up Ignatius’s back. Anything, anything, terror shouted, more than anything. His muscles wished to do anything other than tremble. They shrieked, “Run, run, before it’s too late.” But Ignatius quickly suppressed his muscles and his first impulse, though not without Ssserek taking careful notice.

Ignatius began haltingly, than recovered himself. In for one, in for a dozen. He returned Ssserek’s unswerving gaze. Ignatius sat up, took a deep breath, and calmly addressed Ssserek. “Great serpent, I beg your leave.” Ignatius wished to say more, but at his friendliest, Ssserek was terribly intimidating. Ignatius pushed forward with all of his courage. “I wish to see. Really, Ssserek, no one will believe it! Gosh, it’s incredible, I mean, wow. I mean, WOW! Can you imagine? Golly geeeee! Is Buttons really asleep?” The squirrel’s voice was hushed and reverent. His breath was taken in short gasps and exalted in long hissing sighs.

Ssserek would have guffawed at the squirrel’s temerity, but Ignatius was impressed beyond fear.

“Come, my little one. Climb up, and tell the world what you have seen.”

A great leaper and with strong, facile fingers to help, Ignatius stood looking down on the recumbent figure of Buttons. On her back and partially curled up, she lay resting against Ssserek’s coils. She was clearly relaxed and totally oblivious to her surroundings. Ignatius stood, then sat, then walked around Ssserek’s coils. There was no exclamation that met the need, and he spluttered inarticulately. He sat once again, but this time, too near the focus of his attention. He slipped, then tilted forward. He would have landed on Buttons, except that someone grabbed him by the tail. He twisted, and looking upward, he found himself being lifted into the air by his tail, which was in turn grasped by Ssserek.

Moans, squeaks, and gasps came from the audience surrounding Ssserek. Many of the viewers scrambled to find safer environs. Most simply sat, stunned by the sight of Ignatius dangling by his tail from Ssserek's lips. Without disturbing his coiled portion, Ssserek slowly turned. He paused. The moment was too dramatic not to stop. Everyone sat motionless. There were no sounds other than the quick, deep breaths of rabbit, skunk, bird, and others. Ssserek slowly deposited Ignatius before his mother who moved backwards and then sat with a plop.

Large, round eyes stared at the descending Ignatius, who began to squirm as he came nearer to his mother. As he touched ground, he lay on his side. His legs had deserted him. Ignatius began to stutter. Righting himself, he looked upward only to find himself staring directly into the benevolent and calm face of Ssserek. Ssserek butted him, "Well, say something to your mother. She's waiting."

To this day, Ignatius cannot say who instilled greater awe or fear in him that day—his mother or Ssserek. Whichever existed, it lasted for a moment only as Ignatius's normal insouciant nature got the upper hand. With a "Wow," "Gee whiz," and an agile bow to his mother (first) and then Ssserek, he was off, stopping only to quickly relay what he had seen.

The word spread rapidly through the crowd. The head turned first to the speaker, and then again and again to the snake who had resumed his most placid aspect. The hubbub created by Ignatius was ignored completely. The crowd began to break up into small discussion groups, and a few more daring discussants began to slowly circle Ssserek in vain hope of getting a better view. None to be had, they began to disperse. No one was about to tempt his fate by moving closer to the great snake who had become motionless.

Ignatius returned, puffing from his exertions. He looked up. "Thank you, Great Snake. Your kind actions will be remembered for all time."

Some distance to the rear, his mother was making clicking noises as she sought to gain her intrepid son's attention. Ssserek was not known for patience, and the proximity of her youngest son, scrawny though he was to

the awe-inspiring serpent, was not the least bit desirable from her more-distant view.

She hissed, “Come back, Ignatius, before you irritate him.” She pleaded, “Please come back. You can talk to . . . Buttons. Later.” She had meant to say “That troublemaking little canine” but did not. Ignatius’s loyalty to friends had often caused much trouble in the past, but she was not about to offend Ssserek, particularly not when he was so close.

Ignatius danced in small circles before Ssserek. Torn between his mother’s insistence and all that he had to say, he finally concluded with a “See you tomorrow.” Ignatius bounced towards his mother with many a long look backwards. Ssserek remained motionless.

The temptation was too great. Ignatius was too excited to refrain. He gave no thought to the danger. He had to say it. With a twist, Ignatius bounded towards his target, his mother’s fearful squeak following after him. Standing as high as he could on his back legs, Ignatius piped, “Bet you get a crink in your neck before she wakes.”

Ssserek’s strike was faster than the eye could follow. Its speed was terrifying. Ignatius froze involuntarily, his muscles screaming, “*Run!*” The broad blunt snout loomed above him, filling his horizons. Then ignominiously, Ignatius found himself rolling head over heels toward his mother. The pain was unbearable. It was too well-known that Ssserek’s strike was rapidly fatal. Ignatius cried out as he tumbled through the air. He quickly became aware of his aching posterior as he came to rest in a heap of dust and tattered tail. Dirt filled his mouth and eyes. He coughed repeatedly, his breath coming in hacking, retching of pain. “Wha . . . wha . . . what happened?” He sat up with his rear legs ludicrously poking into the air towards a Ssserek who had regained his unflinching composure.

Ignatius wept loudly, “I’m dying. Mom, Mom, help me. I’m sinking. Ssserek, how could you?” Ignatius propped himself up and looked forlornly into his mother’s face. “I’m sorry, Mom, I couldn’t help it. Really I couldn’t.” He collapsed, sniffing loudly as he did.

His mother ignored her son and stepped around him to approach Ssserek. Bowing with a graceful sweep of her tail, she looked the snake directly in the eye. “My thanks, and my deepest gratitude to you, Great Serpent, for sparing my son, though between you and me, I must wonder why.”

It was with great difficulty that Ssserek was able to bow his head in return and say, “I hope I have not given your youngest too much pain, in view of the many he has given you.”

With another sweep of her tail, mother squirrel bowed once again and slowly moved away. Ignatius sat unbelievably. His mother had never shown any courage in her life to his certain judgment.

“Gee, Mom, I’ve never seen you that close to anyone before.” Rubbing his backside, he returned to the topic of most interest to him. “What happened?”

“He butted you, you . . . you . . . nincompoop!” Her voice was indignant and only marginally concerned. “And, he has my permission to eat you the next time you get too wise for your tail.” She really didn’t mean it, of course. On the other hand, Ignatius knew that he could find himself on the wrong side of Ssserek if he didn’t watch out.

Ignatius responded as a good son should. A small “Oh” and he dutifully followed his mother, his gaze returning again and again to the snake who had not moved.

For his part, Ssserek was still having difficulties. First, it was with great difficulty that he bottled up the silent laughter which threatened to overwhelm him. Secondly, his ribs, all of them, were beginning to ache with the effort. And thirdly, as he slowly turned his gaze at the sleeping Buttons, he would not disturb her for anything, not even the most exasperating of all creatures.

Ssserek slowly regained his composure and settled himself to rest. He meant to return to the contemplation of the greatest mystery of all, The Beginning, but found himself thinking of a greater mystery, SHE!

The noonday sun had passed its zenith and paid scant heed to the silent figure of a great diamondback rattlesnake coiled about a sleeping dog. But for the inhabitants of the Great Field, it was a day they would long remember, and for a particular squirrel who sat throughout the day high on a branch rubbing an aching back, it was a day he was proud to have experienced. It was a good day even if it was a long day.

The End

# The Story of Delph

Buttons and Sally moved through the forest at their steady ground-eating pace, their legs a blur of movement. Buttons's broken tail was carried tight against her round rump, unlike other Scotties whose tails were always held high. Her tail was broken very early in her young life by rats who had ventured into the Great Forest undetected. Buttons would never be able to hold it aloft like a bold, black flag constantly advancing on the enemy. Sally, however, snapped her brown-and-white beagle's tail high and low in a constant game of crack-the-whip. As different as they were, they had one thing in common—they were best of buddies.

In their usual haste to explore anything and everything about them, they stopped now and again to sniff about the tracks of raccoons or the short and long leaps of the weasel. Buttons stopped abruptly. "Look," she said, "the scats of an otter."

Sally looked sideways at her friend, and then approaching the small black droppings, she smelled them. Smells like . . . ."

"Ah, ah," Buttons broke in. "None of that. We've got work to do, remember."

Sally grinned in anticipation. "Boy, I bet that trapper was surprised when he found his traps already sprung and there were no animals in them."

Buttons would have smiled, too, but it was not a fun time. It was dangerous, and great harm had already been done by the trapper. She reminded Sally of it as they moved toward the forest.

"Just keep in mind what has happened already. The trapper is as mean as his traps are unforgiving. They take rabbit, weasel, wolves, and otters alike. He particularly likes to trap and kill beavers."

Sally sighed. "Yes, I know," she said. "Does take some of the fun out of it, doesn't it. I spoke to Dodger the otter and he'll let us know if and when he shows along the waterways."

Buttons grunted her assent. Both had passed the word around both the forest and field, but many small animals remained forgetful and careless, too busy with simply finding food to worry about something most had never heard about in the first place. Still, it had helped some, like the otters and the coyotes who were normally careful. They could understand the trapper taking some for food, but just for the skins. It made no sense to most.

So, today, they were going trap-hunting again. The trapper had gone, the birds having seen him return to his large truck, taking some time to beat his dog who was tied to the truck in order to protect it and warn him of any passersby. He had found the gaunt dog asleep and had taken his usual meanness out on the helpless dog. Both Sally and Buttons had bridled in anger when they had been told. Well, they would fix matters. Sooner or later, they would set the matter right so that the many and varied creatures of the forest, swamp, field, and river could live their lives in freedom.

As they moved forward, the maples gave way slowly to towering fir. Moss hung from the other taller trees in great garlands. The air, which had been quiet and nearly motionless, became increasingly damp. A small, musty breeze broke out, moving the dangling moss slowly to and fro. They were approaching the swamp, and like the air, the ground became soggy also. Small puddles of water appeared on either side of the trail. The bounding tracks of the playful and nosy weasel appeared first at one side and then the other, clearly showing the dogs the weasel's forward and careless rush.

The two dogs suddenly halted. Sally started to move to one side, her keen nose to the ground.

“Do you smell a trap?”

Buttons in turn moved to the right, away from Sally. Their keen sense of smell was focused on the ground immediately in front of them as they moved forward warily, each step carefully placed.

Sally froze in motion, one forepaw still held above the ground. Buttons stopped also. This was the critical time. No movement forward until they



were absolutely sure.

Sally sang out, “Ha! I’ve got one. Over here, Buttons.”

Buttons turned across the trail which was now broken by tufts of grass and the debris of dead and fallen leaves. She carefully stepped through the littered path over to where Sally pawed the moist ground. Both dogs gingerly nosed the ground, turning up small rows of fresh dirt. They stopped a short distance from the main trail. Checking with one another, they began to dig furiously. Because of her strong forelegs and broad paws, Buttons did most of the work, the ground flying backwards from her in a brown spray of dirt and leaves.

It was but a moment before a solid, round, wooden stake was uncovered.

Sally shouldered her way in front of Buttons. “Move over, Buttons. I’ve got it now.”

From past experience, they both knew that what they sought would lie toward the path. With measured strokes, Sally dug inches from the stake, until a link of metal chain appeared. Both sat back to admire their handy work.

“Not bad,” Sally piped in. “Didn’t take too long this time.”

“Nope,” Buttons agreed as she uncovered more of the chain.

Then, the two dogs grasped it and pulled together, hunching their shoulders as they tugged at the metal links. Slowly more and more of the chain appeared as it was torn up from its shallow cover of dirt. It snaked around a hillock of grass and stopped in the middle of the trail.

“Now, altogether.”

With one yank, the gaping jaws of a black and evil-appearing trap burst into view. It lay precisely in the middle of the trail, its wicked teeth waiting for the unwary. Weasel’s track lay but scant inches away.

“Wow, that was a close one,” Sally muttered. “Come on, Buttons. Now, for the worst part.”

The two took a few deep breaths then broke from the trail and moved off into the trees. Buttons reappeared first, dragging a stout limb. She puffed out small clouds of dirt as she moved forward. Stopping, she dropped the limb as she yelled for Sally who shortly appeared.

They sat as they looked from branch to trap. Sally heaved a sigh. "Let's not hurry this one. That thing smells all wrong."

Together, the two picked up the thick limb and moved toward the trap. They laid the solid branch along the lethal jaws and sat again while they surveyed the scene. Sally moved forward and peered closely at the metal contraption lying at her feet. Simple in design, it was easily tripped by an unwary step, the jaws snapping suddenly closed about a leg, or even the muzzle, of an unknowing inspector. Sally was worried more than usual as Buttons could sense. They knew one another very well-moods, likes, and dislikes. Something was wrong, that much was clear. Buttons moved slowly forward.

She stopped short of the jaws. "Move back, Sally. Give me a better view of it. Please. I'm worried, too."

Sally glanced at her friend and nodded in agreement. The danger was ever-present and anything could go wrong in a very brief second.

Buttons moved up, and then very slowly moved around the trap, carefully eyeing it from every possible angle.

"Sally, you're right." Buttons's eyes glittered as she motioned to the beagle. "Take a look from here."

Buttons stepped backwards, giving Sally an opportunity to look at the trap. Sally stood for a moment as she carefully contemplated the metal enemy. It was only a contraption, but nonetheless, it could kill in an instant at the least bit of carelessness.

"Ah, I see. Yes, that's the problem. It's been set so the lightest touch will release the jaws." Sally nudged Buttons. "Either one of us could have bought it today."

Buttons nodded in agreement. It was now a matter of tripping it without placing themselves in jeopardy. For the two dogs, it was not a simple procedure. Although they had solved the problem sometime in the past, this one was going to be trickier than usual.

Each grasped an end of the limb. It was heavy for the two, but some weight was necessary if it was to do the necessary job. They slowly maneuvered it over the trap and then began to lower it lengthwise between the jaws.

Buttons hissed between her teeth, "Slowly, slowly."

Sally glanced at her friend. Both were worried and both knew it.

Buttons stepped back, letting her taller compatriot take one end in her strong teeth. Sally was nervous, for if the trap was sprung a second too soon, the limp would and could do serious damage to her as it snapped upward or in some other unpredictable direction. The trapper had been clever, more clever this time, obviously having taken painstaking care in setting the trap.

Sally slowly backed up, dragging the limb across the trap. When the opposite end had reached the edge of the gaping jaws, Buttons gave a short yip of warning. This was the critical moment. Sally had to move the limb a scant fraction of an inch, letting the end fall on the center of the trap, just as she let go of it. The timing would be critical.

Sally then began to raise her end as high as she could and took another step backward. This was the moment. The tip fell off the edge of the trap to drop into the center of the jaws, which suddenly snapped about the limb. Sally had let go as she felt the end come off the edge of the jaws. And well that she had done so, for the limb snapped upward as it was snared by the jaws. Both dogs involuntarily jumped.

"Wow, no matter how often we do it, it still scares me," Buttons murmured.

Sally quietly agreed as both looked at their success. She thought of the terrible damage the end of the limb might have done to her mouth as it had

jerked upward. She would have to be more careful in the future or they would have to come up with another approach. Neither one seemed desirable in any case.

Still, they continued with their rounds, carefully making their way along the many tortuous paths that led through the forest toward the swamp. The trails were relatively easy for the two to follow because the trapper stink was very characteristic. While he could make their task more difficult, they were up to the challenge and the danger. Only afterwards would they celebrate. For now, it was good enough to survive without injury.

However, it was a close thing. On one occasion, they had found the stake very easily. They should have stopped and reconsidered their situation, but being young, they didn't. Buttons almost paid with her life. As Sally grabbed hold of the stake, her jerk caused another trap to go off. Fortunately for Buttons, she was shorter than even the trapper could have guessed, and the trap had snapped shut scant inches from her tail.

Both had whirled to confront the new danger, and their inspection quickly showed that the second trap had been carefully laid for anyone monkeying with the stake to a larger trap which was to be found in the middle of the nearest path.

Buttons had cocked an eyebrow as she surveyed her black rump. She giggled nervously as she said, "Wow, it's short enough as it is. I don't need that."

Sally had giggled in response, then she simply collapsed as the grim humor of the situation got to her. "First broken, then chomped. You really don't need it."

"So tell me!" Buttons had shot back grimly, and then she, too, caught the infectious humor in it all and had joined Sally in laughter.

However, they were more cautious than ever as they dismantled one trap after another. During a break, as they laid in the shade of a large bush, they heard words of a quiet discussion. Their ears immediately perked up and they carefully made their way toward the speakers.

As they broke into the open, they could see a small and pert sparrow sitting on a branch which hung close to the ground. Sally turned to Buttons, “Yep, you were right. It’s Ms. Lucie. And if she’s here, then . . .”

Before Sally could complete her statement, there was a loud *croooooak* immediately behind them. Both leaped upward and forward as they whirled to confront a large frog whom they immediately recognized.

Ms. Lucie chuckled, “Will you two never learn?”

Buttons frowned at first, not pleased at being taken by surprise. But then both she and Sally joined in laughter with Ms. Lucie for, of course, it was Rarebit, the frog. He and Ms. Lucie were often to be found in discussion of some arcane bit of knowledge, usually about the swamp. And, of course, Rarebit liked nothing better than to surprise the two dogs by suddenly appearing behind them as he croaked as loudly as possible.

Ms. Lucie smiled at the two dogs who were always to be found in one another’s company. “And what mischief are we up to now?” She cocked her head as she waited for an answer.

Sally then described what they had done, much to the approval of both Ms. Lucie and Rarebit. Their praise was most gratifying to Buttons and Sally because Ms. Lucie was far quicker with her warnings and faultfindings.

As the two nodded their gratitude and were about to leave, Rarebit spoke up. “Buttons, Sally, be careful around the swamp. Strange things have been happening there.”

Buttons had laughed. “Not to worry, Ms. Lucie. We can take care of ourselves.”

Ms. Lucie now truly frowned. She jabbed the air with her beak. “Take heed, my sassy young lady. Rarebit is rarely wrong on such matters. Do be careful.”

Sally nodded reassuringly. But both wanted to get away from the small sparrow as quickly as possible. “Don’t worry. We’ll be very careful. Truly,”

they both said as they moved quickly into the deeper parts of the forest, heading unerringly for the swamp.

Frog and sparrow were soon lost to sight, and as quickly forgotten. The day was getting on. They moved off toward a sandy shore, and refreshing themselves in a particularly clean pool, they relaxed in the warm afternoon heat. The buzzing of mosquitoes and chirruping of other bugs came distantly to them, but nothing disturbed the calm breathlessness of the great body of water which lay at their side. The heat and their earlier efforts worked on both of them, and slowly they sank into a peaceful torpor, only the occasional twitching of their ears showing some degree of alertness.

It was some time later when Buttons opened her eyes ever so slightly because an odd odor was assailing her nostrils. It was dank and wet, but not altogether bad. It was quite familiar.

It was also different. A croaking “Hiridit, hiridit” sounded in her ear and she leaped alert, sending Sally tumbling to her feet also.

Buttons gasped and then said, “Oh, it’s you again, Rarebit. Boy, were you quiet.”

Suddenly, he leaped, sailing effortlessly over their head to splash in the shallow waters of the swamp. He surfaced, but only his goggling large eyes showed. They watched unblinking. Then he leaped again, this time landing directly in front of them.

“As I should be when strange creatures invade my wet and lovely domain.” He hummed to himself as his large eyes stared fixedly at them. Lean for a frog, he was smooth-skinned with varying shades of green. He seldom smiled, but Sally and Buttons knew his odd sense of humor. Both dogs loved him for his knowledge of the swamp and his inquiring mind.

“First,” Buttons said, “we are not strange, as you well know, and secondly, you might have announced yourself.”

Of course, he never did. Rarebit’s throat puffed in and out as he surveyed them, his eyes occasionally closing in their slow fashion. “You just saw me. In the swamp.” He stared even harder at them.

Sally frowned, her eyebrows coming together as she tried to keep up with Rarebit's thinking. "Of course, we saw you. What's the matter?"

Rarebit puffed and huffed some more, his eyes remaining fixed on them. "All of me?"

Buttons answered. "Of course not. Only your eyes."

"Then you have the answer. There are other eyes just like that in the swamp, but much further apart."

Both dogs laughed. "You're repeating yourself again. You and Ms. Lucie just told us about something strange in the swamp. You're both daft, you know."

Rarebit suddenly leaped straight up, twisted in the air, and landed behind Sally, who in turn leaped sideways at the unexpected maneuver.

Rarebit watched Sally momentarily from his new position. "Gotcha!" With that he leaped into the swamp and sat there watching the two, who sat on the beach. "Remember." He turned and disappeared, leaving hardly a ripple on the water's surface.

Sally's sides heaved with frustration. "So, help me. The next time he does that, I'm going to have frog legs for dinner."

Buttons giggled. Rarebit was something of the area's map maker and he knew the swamp like the back of his foot. He often discussed it with Ms. Lucie, but rarely disclosed much to the two dogs. In the past, both of them had suffered from Rarebit's unpredictable antics. As they would walk along the water's edge, he would appear seemingly out of the air—in front of them, behind them, or from behind a clump of reeds. At other times, they would find him busily sketching lines in the sand, stepping back to survey his handy work, dropping forward to erase some errant line, and then carefully redoing his previous effort, all the time humming to himself. As preoccupied as he appeared, he was never to be caught by surprise, try as they might.

On more than one occasion, they had crept up to the swamp, carefully maneuvering so that they approached from downwind. Circling with caution after they had located him, they would rush forward, barking furiously, only to find his expected location empty. Then, a sudden “Gotcha” would sound behind them and he would disappear into the swamp, chuckling in his throat.

At such times, Buttons and Sally would look sideways at one another and burst out laughing at their ridiculous failure.

Slowly shaking her head side to side in disgust, Sally glanced at Buttons. “Well, wonder where he’s off to now,” she queried. “And just what did he mean by his crazy actions?”

“Undoubtedly off to survey another cove in the swamp,” a small voice sounded above them.

Both looked up, startled by the clear, crisp speech. Bouncing gently in the breeze, an elegant but small bird perched on the overhanging branch of an oak tree. Very prim in appearance, she cocked her head and went on with scant interruption. “You well know that Rarebit must measure everything within reach.”

Buttons sat up and greeted the bird with a nod. “Good morning, again, Ms. Lucie. And how are you today?”

The sparrow appreciated decorous behavior almost as much as she insisted on perfection and a precise mind. Her speech was always well-modulated, though her discussions with Rarebit were famous for their biting comments.

She looked down. “Ah, Sally. And of course, Buttons.” She cocked her head to survey them the better, as though she hadn’t just seen them a bit earlier. This type of inspection always discomfited the two dogs, but they were getting used to it.

Buttons bristled, but only grunted again, “Morning, Ma’am.”



The genteel Ms. Lucie clearly preferred the slim and tidier beagle to the Scottish terrier who all too often looked quite ratty after a morning rambling about in the woods.

“And a good morning to you,” she replied. “Both.”

Sally bumped Buttons ever so slightly. Sitting very carefully, she said, “Rarebit was just here.”

“Yes, I know. I sent him. Leaping hither and yon, I imagine.”

Buttons couldn’t help it. She groaned. Not another warning. She slumped onto her hip and took a deep breath.

Ms. Lucie would have corrected Buttons’s posture, but she had other matters that needed immediate attention. She simply reaffirmed Rarebit’s message.

“Just remember, there is something strange and mysterious going on in the swamp. You, both of you, will pay attention. Do you understand?” She was frowning quite hard by now as she too stared at the two below her.

“Yes, ma’am,” they replied, “we’ll be very careful. Thank you.”

“Hmmm,” Ms. Lucie was not so certain, but she must be off. With one last warning, she took flight and was almost immediately out of sight.

Sally sighed. “Wow, she’s really odd today.”

Buttons just snorted. “Probably mislaid an egg.”

That broke Sally up and their peals of laughter could be heard with ease at a great distance. And, it was at a distance that something decided to investigate the sounds further. Sounded good enough to eat was the only thought as it quietly submerged into the dark depths of the swamp.

Buttons rushed to Sally who easily evaded the attempt at her tail. Off they raced, splashing down the muddy margin of the marsh. They finally slowed. The heat was building and they sought the shade of tree where they collapsed, panting at their sudden exercise. But shortly, Buttons was up and exploring the area, her nose to the ground. Sally watched as she lay on her

side, then she, too, rose and moved to the swamp's edge for a drink. She then began to sniff.

Metal, rusty metal, could be faintly detected in the water. That meant only one thing—another trap. But where? Buttons looked at her friend who was standing quite still as she sampled the air. It might be anywhere along the shore, but typically the stake had to be in good, solid earth. Without hesitation, both moved toward the edge of the sand and began to slowly move along it, being very careful with each step.

Buttons suddenly grunted, and then pawed the soil very carefully. Sally moved alongside, casting about for any evidence of the chain. Then, she, too, began to dig. Very slowly, gently sweeping dirt and sand aside. In a moment, they had uncovered a length of chain, very rusty and obviously very old.



Sally and Buttons both sat, momentarily just looking at one another. Then Sally spoke up, “Boy, just how many times have we come this way? Gives me the shivers.”

“Me, too,” added Buttons. “We could have run right over it, must have. Come on, let’s get it out.”

Both set to work, working in opposite directions. The chain was indeed fastened to a stake, now sunk quite deep in the dirt and very near the shade of the tree where they had dozed on more than one occasion. Buttons found the trap and they both set to work, digging the sand away from it. As they had thought, it was deeper than usual, and soon both had their heads down in the hole as they busily dug the sand away.

As they worked, the surface of the water offshore roiled to an unseen disturbance within the dark depths. Then, with no sound whatsoever, two round and bulbous eyes appeared. Small droplets of water ran down their brows, but there was no other movement. Nearby, several turtles dozing in the sun on a partially rotten limb that protruded above the surface paid no attention. So quietly had the eyes appeared. Two nostrils as quietly appeared above the water. Only the four protuberances gave evidence that more, much more, lay below. The eyes slowly turned their attention toward the two small dogs digging in the soft sand on the shore.



“HMMMM,” thought their owner, “a very nice morsel indeed.”

Nostrils and eyes smoothly glided forward, the water barely disturbed by their passage. As land was touched, the creature burst out of the water, sand churned and was tossed in all directions, and a huge spray of water covered the shore. The creature bellowed as he rushed across the narrow strip of sand that lay between him and his prey. He was upon them in a fraction of a second.

Young they might be, and small, even for their ages. But slow? Never! With the yawning gap of the jaws rushing toward her, Sally leaped up and away. Buttons spun on her tail as the jaws clashed together in a thunderous chomp.

The alligator, for that was what their attacker was, in turn spun after Sally. As he turned toward Sally, he swiped at Buttons with his tail. He missed, but not by much. His teeth clashed just behind Sally as his tail missed by a scant inch of battering Buttons. Sally raced in twisting circles. The great creature kept himself between her and the sheltering trees. Buttons could do nothing but bark furiously. Her attempt to distract their attacker failed. His eyes were fixed on Sally. Buttons was ignored. For the moment. One quick chomp and he would be after the black one next.

“Sally,” Buttons yelled, “The trap . . . remember?” Her words came in broken fragments as mud and water flew. Sally was panting with great effort. Her lungs burned with the effort of evading the alligator. Buttons raced to and fro. Nothing distracted their adversary.

Buttons frantically rushed forward. She must do something. Sally could not hold out much longer. With all of her strength, Buttons grabbed the tail of the alligator. Her answer was a bellow from the creature who snapped his tail, sending her flying. She landed with a splash of muck and mud. She hurtled herself once again upon the creature, yapping furiously as she did so. The reptile ignored Buttons's frantic efforts. She was too fast for him, but the other was tiring rapidly. He assailed the beagle once more.

Bellowing lustily, he charged at Sally, his large eyes gleaming with hunger and anger.

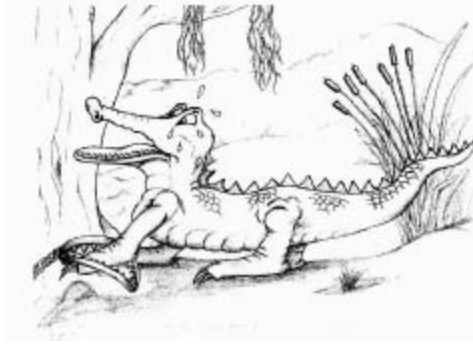
However, Buttons's brief attack had given Sally the breath she needed. This time, instead of running in circles, Sally raced in ever-widening spirals, twisting and turning so that her tail was ever before the gator, but just out of reach, leading him to the trap.

Buttons's voice came to her over the heated attack. "More to the right. Almost. A little more. Now, be careful. Jump. Jump, give it all you got!"

Sally did as she was ordered, leaping blindly into the air with the last gasp of air in her throbbing lungs. She hit the dirt with a thud, and rolling over, came to her feet just as the alligator once again snapped at her.

There was a loud grating sound as the jaws of the trap closed. Rusty with age, the trap's teeth still could bite. And hard. They snapped together, holding the gator's foreleg in their unrelenting grasp.

He flopped forward on his nose, short of Sally by a hair's breadth. Sand flew in all directions, covering both dogs and alligator. The alligator began bawling in pain and fright. He thrashed to and fro in a frenzy of fear. Dirt, sand, and leaves flew with each thrashing movement. He hurtled himself side to side. When that was to no avail, he rolled back and forth. But each time, he was firmly held to the one spot by his right forepaw which was firmly grasped in the jaws of the old, rusted trap.



The alligator was stretched out to his limit. His wide, dark eyes glared with hurt and confusion. Sally stood just in front of his snout, crouched and snarling, the hair on her back raised in a stiff ridge of anger. Buttons, too, stood at the opposite side, her large fangs bared. Both dogs were frozen, waiting to see which way the saurian would move. Sally was about to say something nasty, when she noted his evident pain. Suddenly, she sat, totally mystified by what she was seeing.

The great, limpid eyes of the alligator were wet and tears could be seen welling in their suffering depths. He whimpered. Sally blinked and motioned Buttons, who cautiously worked her way around his tail which lay curled to his side. The alligator moaned. Buttons and Sally blinked together as the reptile curled up around his forepaw and began to cry, broken by loud, shuddering moans.

“Well, I’ll be a monkey’s uncle,” Sally said.

Buttons sat down with a plop. “Good gosh,” was all she could manage.

Sally took a deep breath and approached the sobbing creature. “I’ll be damned. I’ve heard of weeping willows, *cri-de-coeur*, and a weeping vagabond. That’s you. That’s you. Would you stop it? Sounds pretty silly for a creature of your size to be sniveling like that.”

One large, lucent eye opened slowly and gazed at her with hurt. Between sobs, he answered, all the while gurgling deeply in his throat, “It hurts, it hurts soooo bad.” He tugged at the large chain which securely

fastened his leg to the stake sunk firmly in the ground. “Oh,” he groaned, “it hurts my leg soooo bad.”

Buttons stepped forward, until her nose touched his very much larger snout. She was still angry at the sudden attack. “Go ahead, brown eyes, snivel. It’s not going to do you any good.”

Then, she suddenly remembered Rarebit’s and Ms. Lucie’s warning. Not once, but three times. She turned to Sally and then back to the alligator’s large, round eyes. Sally sighed, “Blew it again, didn’t we?”

“Big time, I think. Just look at those eyes. Just like Rarebit said when he left us.”

Buttons’s voice was softer and her tone somewhat kinder when she addressed him again. “Look, buddy, who are you. Why’d you try to bite me?”

“Gee, I’d never really meant to do that. Really, I mean, you know,” he finished lamely, looking away as he did so.

Sally joined her friend and both faced him, squarely looking him in the eyes. “That’s not a truly friendly answer, you know.”

Buttons insisted on knowing more. “What’s your name, dummy?” She began to bounce up and down a bit, a sure sign she was becoming impatient.

Sally broke in, “Look, friends don’t go about trying to eat one another, you know.”

The reptile’s stomach ominously growled in disagreement, but its owner saw the wisdom in ignoring it. “I hurt,” he repeated. “Besides, I’d never hurt you. Really.” Both of his large opulent eyes stared innocently into those opposite him.

Sally coughed as she looked heavenward. “As I recall, your friendship was rather toothy a moment ago.”

The alligator sighed, “Well, you see, sometimes my stomach sort of . . . well . . .” He stopped. Obviously neither really believed him. “I’m always

hungry,” he wailed. “I don’t have any friends. I’ve never really been in such a place before, you know.”

“Look,” Buttons said, “if you really don’t have any friends, maybe it’s because they’re not around long enough to be friends. Ever think of that.” She glared at him, making the alligator wince inwardly. She did have a point.

“Well, maybe, you could be . . .” He looked expectantly at the two who stood defiantly before him.

Sally relented, somewhat, as she approached nearer. “Look, friend, I’ll be a friend, if you’re a friend. Get it?”

The alligator slumped against the stake, which only poked him in the ribs, making his decision even more difficult. The pain in his side made his teeth glimmer as his lips rippled in response.

Both dogs immediately backed off, not knowing if they could really trust this very large creature. However, the sound of rustling in the bush behind them froze them momentarily. Their ears went up and they turned toward the sound, ignoring, for the time being, the large alligator in the grasp of the trap.

Buttons smiled as she immediately recognized the sound as it approached. Sally started wagging her tail as a huge rattlesnake slithered into view. At the snake’s appearance, the alligator’s mouth dropped open, for he had never seen a snake so large. The alligator looked in shocked amazement as the dogs were rushing toward the snake with tails wagging.

Buttons leaped against the snake’s broad breast as she addressed him, “Morning, Ssserek. Boy, is it good to see you.”

Ssserek’s pupils expanded slightly as his tongue flitted about her, taking in the many details of the morning’s events. Then he touched Sally’s nose gently, sending ripples of surprise down the alligator’s back.

Ssserek nodded briefly to the two, and looked fixedly at the alligator who tried very hard to become invisible by shrinking himself into the most



compact position possible. All to no avail.

Buttons nudged Sally as she watched the great snake, who was both friend and mentor. Of all the creatures in the forest and field, Ssserek was the grandest and the best in their opinion, which they shared with many of their disbelieving friends. Sally looked to heaven again as she recalled the warnings given earlier in the morning.

Ssserek had missed none of the interplay, smiling to himself. Nonetheless, he hissed in their ears as he lowered his head to their level, “Well, Ms. Lucie was correct again, was she not? Hmmm?”

Both Buttons and Sally squirmed beneath his stern visage. “Well, yes, we did sort of forget.” Both sat up, placing a small paw on his chest. Embarrassment, yes, that was there, but so too humor. He couldn’t help it. Ssserek smiled, albeit a bit grimly.

Saying nothing more to the two young scamps at his side, he moved so he could clearly view the alligator’s predicament. The stake was indeed large and deeply sunk. The chain might be rusty with age, but it, too, was large and would hold such a creature for a long time. The trap itself was of an old, but simple, design and had great strength. It presented a unique problem, which even the cunning of his two friends and their lack of strength could not hope to cope. He turned to them as they sat watching him with keen anticipation.

“Well, my young friends, I see you’ve caught yourself a very large fish, indeed.”

A loud groan came from the alligator. “I’m not a fish,” he wailed.

Sally looked to one side as she answered for both Buttons and herself. “Well, it did take some doing, but it wasn’t all that difficult. We simply led him into the trap as he tried to catch us.” She shrugged contemptuously as the alligator groaned once again.

Ssserek’s head snapped down, and before the alligator could move, he found himself staring eye to eye with the father of reptiles. “Not surprising,

but then, our Prometheus here obviously has not met you two before. Else he would have known better, I vow.”

When his lungs could once again fill themselves, however little, the alligator could only blink slowly as Ssserek asked, “And, fellow reptile, what do you have to say? What did you say your name was? From which land do you hail? AND, how dare you assault my friends.” This last was hissed at the cringing alligator like a maddened steam pipe.

The alligator began to jitter, “I, I, I . . .” but then catching himself, rose as tall as his short legs allowed. He had spunk.

“My name,” his nose rose as he said it, “is Delphinus. And, I am an alligator, the largest of reptiles.”

His nose dipped toward Ssserek. “I came by way of Murphy’s Marvelous Moving Van of Exotic Creatures.”

Sally broke in, “You mean you escaped from some jerk water sideshow?”

She started to continue when Buttons came to his rescue. “That’s OK, Delph, you’re sort of cute.”

Delph, which became an instant nickname, started to smile, when Buttons added, “But then, I’ve never seen one of you before. Do you all have so many teeth?”

Delph gasped as Buttons stood against him, trying to peer into his mouth, made easier by his actions.

Delph couldn’t help but smile.

“Boy, they are big,” Buttons said.

“But, I am not very old.” He couldn’t help himself. “They are grand, though, aren’t they?” His grin was the largest either Buttons or Sally had ever seen.

“So, do we free you?” Ssserek asked.

Thoroughly deflated, Delph sank once again to the ground. He groaned and eyes filled with tears once again.

“Easy, little one,” Buttons said as she surveyed the trap. “There must be something we can do.”

Her tail wiggled enticingly before Delph’s eyes, and he clamped them shut for fear his thoughts would be apparent to the snake.

“Now, hold on a sec, Buttons,” Sally broke in. She placed herself directly in front of Delph’s nose, making him cross his eyes as he tried to keep her in focus. “Why should we be friends with you? Tell me that.”

Delph moaned. His leg was beginning to hurt more and more. He really did like these two. They were so different.

He tried to explain. “You see, I was caged all the time. And only got fed on occasion. I sometimes eat things I shouldn’t because I was hungry all the time.” He didn’t add that the swamp more than adequately provided for him. That was obvious.

“Besides,” Delph continued, “I am the world’s most ferocious alligator.” He finished lamely. “Well, that’s what the sign said, but golly gee whiz, oh nuts.” He stopped. He wasn’t getting anywhere.

Sally decided to champion Delph. She had taken a liking to the young alligator, although she would never admit it. She glanced at Buttons. “Good cop, bad cop?”

Buttons didn’t bother to nod. The gleam in her eye clearly said, “Go for it.”

“Well, Delph, we would really like to help, but . . .” Sally left her thought hanging as Delph raised up, pulling at the chain in the sudden hope of being released.

“Yeah, but, no more trying to eat us.” Buttons stood on stiff legs, her voice hard and demanding.

Delph wilted. “Look, I wouldn’t ever, ever eat you. You know that.” He began again. Obviously, it hadn’t gone over particularly well.

“Gosh, I’ve never had a friend, anywhere. In my cage, I couldn’t even see who was next to me. And I had to fight for what I got to eat. Hunger has few friends, you know.”

Sally saw the immediate opening. “But, here in the swamp, you need never be hungry again.

Even Buttons had to admit the truth of his last statement, even though she did so grudgingly and slowly.

Buttons glared at Delph. “Look, maybe we can be friends. But how do we know you’ll keep your word?”

Ssserek broke in. It was time to finish the matter. He calmly gazed at the young alligator and his two friends. “I don’t believe he would ever forget his word if he gives it to all *three* of us. True, my young alligator?”

Delph stared at the great snake. He won’t dare not to keep his word. It would be hard, but he wanted friends. He wanted to be free, free to be able to talk with someone, anyone, yes, even these two, these two who had so neatly trapped him. Yes, he would keep his word.

“Yes, yes, yes,” Delph shouted with glee. “Yes, I will keep my word. And, be your friend.” He hesitated slightly as he said the last, looking squarely at Buttons. Clearly, it was her call with Ssserek to back her up.

Buttons couldn’t hold anger very long, particularly when trying to feign it. She smiled. “Yes, we’re friends. OK?” She licked Delph on the nose and Sally sealed the deal by climbing onto his snout and licking his eyebrow. It was just as well she couldn’t see his huge grin for at the best of times, only Ssserek’s smile could be more alarming.

Ssserek grinned to himself as Buttons was joined by Sally. Their simple and transparent joy in life always filled him with a warm feeling. They began a minute inspection of the chain and trap, Sally’s tail slapping Delph’s nose again and again as the two went about their business.

Delph simply clamped his mouth shut and closed his eyes. Temptation had never been greater.

It took several moments before they reached the same conclusion.”Nuts! Take all day to dig up that stake.”

While the dirt flew furiously from Buttons’s paws, Sally sought a limb with which they might lever-open the jaws of the trap. In a very short time, it became apparent they would fail. However deep, Buttons dug. The soft silt-like dirt fell back in, and however they tried to wedge the jaws open, either the branch broke or the angle was wrong. Buttons dropped disconsolately next to Delph.

Why did he have to mix it up with these two? Bad enough with them running back and forth before his very nose, but to have Ssserek watching every move. No. No. No. It was his own fault. Here, he had friends, no longer lost or hungry. No. He would see it through. He groaned, but hung in there, waiting for his new friends to solve the impossible.

“He sounds like a sick moose,” Sally said.

Buttons jerked erect. “Ha! That’s it!” She said it very emphatically.

“It’s what,” Sally asked as Ssserek grinned to himself.

Leave it to them. They’d come through. He moved forward. “The moose, my little one. He has a hoof that no trap can resist.” Ssserek stopped and swayed as he looked at the sky. “Yes, I think we can do it. Sally?”

She jumped at the singular urgency in his voice. “Yes, sir, what can I do?”

Ssserek swayed back and forth as he considered all possibilities. “You can bugle. Bugle loud, dear. That’s what you can do. That’s precisely what you must do.”

Sally nodded. Then she wasted no more time in questions. She knew what had to be done. She raced off to the east, and in a short time reached a small knoll amidst a clearing of trees. Quickly reaching the top, she raised her voice in the clarion call of her kind.

Her bell-like voice reached higher and higher into the air as only beagles can when very excited. Into the afternoon air her call rose, reaching

far to the south and east.

At first, nothing happened. A few birds stopped to ponder the racket, but then went back to their feeding. But her voice carried until it touched a receptive mind. Rummaging in deep and wet foliage, two very large ears snapped erect. Their owner was large, very large indeed, and his head came up from the water that encircled him. He listened carefully, taking in the nuances and urgency of the message. He listened as large green leaves and other foliage hung from his large blubbery mouth.

Then the young moose surged toward the shore, leaving his feeding for later. He was large even in his relative youth, for moose are the largest of all deer. He was lank and very tall, his shoulders being higher than the rest of his back. His head was awkward-looking to those not familiar with a moose, long in the snout, with large nostrils which he could close and open rapidly, and drooping blubbery lips which could suck large amounts of water foliage into his gaping maw. He liked to eat, and he would often leave the large zoo's grazing field for the nearby swamp when he was really hungry. Of course, he wasn't supposed to leave the field, but he had solved that problem some time ago. Now, he came and returned as he pleased, knowing when the time was right.

But now was the time for action. He moved. He moved with speed and strength. He moved with ground-eating strides, his bulk seemingly blotting out sun as he made his way, first to the forest and then through it. He traveled along hidden trails. Where there was none, he made them. Bushes he ignored. Saplings he simply tore from the earth in his passage. The large trees he nimbly avoided. At last, he burst on the beach, shaking leaf, mud and water in all directions.

Ssserek waited patiently until the great creature approached and dipped his long snout.

"I'm here, Ssserek, as you called."

Buttons stood on her hind legs for a better view of the very large animal before her. Ssserek was large, Delph even larger, but this one was huge. "Holy cow," she blurted out. "What are you?"

His head swung down and around to take in the small dog in front of him. As he did so, he sprayed her with particles of aquatic plants, gobs of mud, and drops of water.

“Yuk. My, but you’re messy,” Buttons spluttered.

“I was in a hurry, and I don’t appreciate your humor,” rumbled the deep voice.

Buttons took a few dainty steps around the messy moose. “You what?” she asked him.

Before the conversation could tail off, Ssserek stopped them both with a flick of his tail. “Your opening exclamatory comment, Buttons. He is definitely not a cow. Nor the least bit holy,” he chuckled.

“Sure, OK. But that’s not what I meant. And besides, you know very well.”

A plaintive voice came from behind them. “Could we perhaps get on with this? My foot! It hurts!” Delph whined.

All three turned their attention to the unhappy alligator who drooped disconsolately before them. They were gathering around him when Sally appeared from the trees, having made her way back more slowly from the knoll.

She took one glance at the creature and started to say something, but just shook her head in wonderment. She raced up to them, taking her position between Buttons and Ssserek.

Ignoring the poor alligator’s plight, the great creature took a deep breath, raised one eyebrow, and then lowered his head so that his nostrils puffed directly into their faces with each breath. “I am Milo, the moose, famous for his strength and . . .”

Sally interrupted by muttering beneath her breath, “Good gosh. Another Greek scholar.”

The creature’s head swayed ever so slightly, his large upper lip gently contacting Sally’s shoulder. She went tumbling, fetching up in surprise

against the alligator's snout, a smile rippling down his face so that all glowing fangs passed in review.

They looked at one another in surprise but said nothing as Milo continued, "Famous for my strength and cunning sense of humor." His "Ho, ho, ho" boomed out over the swamp, sending egrets and cranes flapping into the air.

Sally looked more disgruntled than chagrined, but closed her mouth.

She took the tumbling in good humor.

Ssserek moved past the moose and scanned the chain, stake, and trap binding Delph securely to the ground. Motioning to Buttons, he said, "You will have to guide our rather large friend here, as I will instruct you. Please note the lever at this end. It must be pressed very firmly and not too fast."

Buttons's short legs and keen eyes allowed her the best possible view, and it took only a moment for her to fathom the mechanism. Moving about, she stood pressed against the head of Delph, who turned his large, luminous eyes on her as she rested against the corner of his mouth. His upper lip rippled ever so slightly, causing Buttons to look up.

She met his gaze squarely. "Easy shoe-leather, you'd make tough but enjoyable chew bones."

Delph slowly winked as his lips began to ripple once again. Buttons was about to say more when Ssserek broke in, "Easy, both of you. We must work together. And, very carefully if the matter is to be concluded successfully."

Delph's breath came a bit quicker, but he refrained from saying more. Ssserek was right. And, after all, he did have a point.

Buttons turned to Ssserek and Milo, "Do you think we'll need to have something under the trap so that it's not simply buried?"

Ssserek measured Milo's hoof and the soft ground. "You're probably right. Though just how we're going to manage it will take some thought."



Sally stepped forward. "Perhaps we could just have Delph roll over and hold the trap on his chest."

Delph started to follow through on the suggestion before he noticed the bland stares the two dogs were giving him. He stopped. He surveyed Milo, carefully took in his splayed hoof and the weight they bore, then said, "Thanks, morsel, but no thanks. He'd squish me flat."

Buttons giggled, "Well, Delph, it was only a suggestion."

Turning to Sally, she said, "Come on. It's up to us to find something. Let's go." Off the two raced, leaving small prints in the soft dirt.

Sally was back in minutes with a shout. Skidding up to Delph, Sally announced, "We've got a big flat rock, but we can't move it. Come on, Milo. Back in a sec, Delph."

As an afterthought, she turned to Delph and said, "Don't go away."

Milo bellowed and moved after the fleet four-legged figure of Sally. She was right. Only a scant seventy yards down the edge of the swamp and slightly inland lay a flat stone. Buttons was digging furiously. She looked up, with mud encasing her face from snout to ears. "It doesn't go very deep," she announced, "but Sally and I can't move it together. That's for sure."

The two friends moved about it, measuring the rock from all angles. Milo smiled at their serious demeanor. Moving up to the stone, he nudged it with one great hoof. It moved slightly.



“Hey,” Buttons shouted, “Milo, you’ve got it.”

He was about to ask her what she meant, when it dawned on him. “Humph . . . Yes, indeed. Watch.”

He kicked at it, spraying muck and leaves in all directions. But, the stone had moved perceptibly.

“Do it again, Milo, but this time aim it,” Buttons shouted excitedly.

Milo muttered to himself, “Aim it? What does she think I am?” He looked down as Sally danced about his hooves. “Easy there, Sally. I can’t always see you, you know.”

“Don’t worry, you big ox. You’re not that lucky.”

Milo’s disgruntled retort was lost as the two dogs put their heads together, resting them on the rock as they looked down the beach. “Yep, that’ll do it.”

Buttons moved out in front of Delph so that she could speak directly to him. When she had finished and carefully informed the moose of his part, she moved away.

Milo waited patiently until the two had backed off, then he swatted at the stone once again, but this time taking careful aim and using more strength.

The result was more than gratifying; it was spectacular. The rock lifted into the air, like a discus, sailed down the shore, and skidded to a stop ten

yards away.

“Wow,” Sally muttered, “Now, that’s strength.”

Milo beamed his appreciation and jogged nonchalantly toward the stone, where he repeated his previous action. After several such attempts, both Delph and Ssserek were amazed to see the flat stone sail into view and come skidding to a stop a few feet away. Milo’s booming came clearly to them as he appeared around the reeds lining the swamp, the two dogs yipping and laughing at his heels.

“Hey, Ssserek,” Sally shouted, “did you ever see anything like that? He’d be a fantastic place kicker.”

“He sure would,” Buttons agreed, “the Bears sure could use him.”

Milo frowned. Now, what would he want with a bear? Biff was bad enough, always wallowing in the shallows and making a mess of the water plants. Buttons guessed his thoughts and added, “The Chicago Bears, you know.”

He looked down at the impertinent young Scottie and had to smile. The reference escaped him, but he would get it all later. Milo was beaming at Sally’s compliment as he skidded to a stop in front of Delph who reared back to avoid the mass of muscle coming at him.

“Easy,” Buttons said, as she mounted Delph’s back. She stopped between the two large eyes that crossed in their attempt to see her.

Delph didn’t know what to do. Ssserek rested to one side. Sally bounced back and forth along the shore. Milo beamed down from his great height.

Buttons scanned the group from her position atop Delph. “Now, look. This is how we’re going to do it, so pay attention because I have to get there where the rock is going.” With that she leaped to the ground and wiggled down the hole so that she could view the trap, Delph, and rock.

“Delph, raise your paw. Keep the trap off the ground.”

Delph slowly raised his sore leg as he partially rolled onto his side, partially squashing Buttons in the process. “No, no, you big twit. Higher,

and keep off of me.”

“Sally, do please keep an eye on him. He’s the pits.”

Delph grinned impudently and rolled slightly more toward Buttons. Her yell of dissatisfaction was most gratifying.

“Milo, if you will, just nudge that rock forward. Ssserek can tell you just about when to stop.” Buttons grunted with effort as she freed herself from between Delph and the side of the hollow. She glowered at the saurian who only smiled blandly.

Buttons returned to the hole, stepping down into it so that only her small rump showed. Her voice was partially obscured by alligator, trap, and chain as she carefully surveyed them. “Delph, please, cooperate. After all, it’s your leg.”

Everyone did as requested. Milo slowly nudged the stone forward until Ssserek asked him to pause. Sally saw to the final placement. And finally, Delph could heave a sigh of relief as he lowered his paw, the trap clinking as he did so.

Both Sally and Ssserek slowly measured the stone and the placement of the trap, and when it met specifications, nodded simultaneously to Buttons.

“Well,” she said, “that’s that. Good job. That was great Milo. Couldn’t have done it without you.”

She glanced down at Delph, whose tail was twitching fretfully to and fro. “Getting anxious, water moccasin, old friend?” She rubbed his knobs gently.

Delph sighed deeply. No one had ever been so gentle with him, or spoke jokingly as though he were one of the group. It was a nice sensation.

Ssserek moved back so Sally could watch Milo’s hoof as he slowly advanced it toward the trap. Delph shuddered, but quieted as Button crooned to him. “Easy, Delph, easy. Milo’s really very gentle.”

Delph glanced at her. She really meant it. The tone of her voice was soothing and reassuring and Milo was moving very slowly. It was

surprising just how slow he could move such a large hoof. He liked it. He enjoyed being the center of attention, not being kicked or yelled at, much less being beaten. As badly as his leg ached, another, deeper ache was slowly disappearing from his heart.

Sally cocked an eyebrow at her friend and thought of the blow to her rump Delph had delivered earlier, but kept her thoughts to herself. There were more important matters at hand.

Delicacy, not muscle, was needed here. Sally slowly guided Milo as he picked up one hoof and then swung it forward to hover just over the trap. Delph could not move further away and Milo could not directly see the trap which was partially hidden from view. Thus, he had to depend upon the eyes and judgement of the two dogs. Buttons was reassuring Delph and Sally was guiding the leading edge of his hoof so that it contacted the lever which could release the jaws of the trap. Twice Milo had to stop and move his hoof as it slid off the rusting metal trap.

Sally's nose was almost in continuous contact with the hoof or the trap as she guided Milo. Finally, he had the purchase he needed. With scant pressure, or so it seemed to him, the lever was depressed and the jaws flopped open. With a shout of glee, Delph bounded away from the frightening contraption and rolled over and over in the shallow edge of the swamp, sending geysers of mud and water flying into the air.

"Wow, wee, woo, wow," was all he shouted for several moments.

Buttons carefully approached Ssserek, butted him with her head, and said, "You were great, Sssserek. Thanks, again."

He quietly beamed and nodded in agreement.

Both Sally and Buttons sidled up to Milo, rubbing themselves against his huge legs. "You were great, Milo. Really, no one else could have done it."

He smiled hugely. Rather nice, for young dogs. Not always barking for no reason at all. "Well, I couldn't have done it without you. You were very good. Great teamwork. Anytime you need me, you know where I am."

By this time, Delph had recovered himself and was watching the four friends. Slowly, his stout legs carried him silently forward until he stood next to Sally. Tipping his head so that he could better survey the small beagle, he very slowly brought his jaws to her side, his lips slowly writhing up and down at her proximity.

His growling, grumbling stomach gave his presence away. Both Sally and Buttons leaped away, whirling to confront the alligator.

Buttons scrambled onto Delph. Slinking up his long snout with her belly dragging on his ridged and rough hide, she paused before his luminous eyes. “Will you never learn?” She sat and pondered this new and fascinating addition to the swamp. As she did so, Milo moved up so that he stood over the alligator. The shadow of the huge moose made Delph nervous and he began to fidget. However, he didn’t move. He simply waited to hear what Buttons wanted.

“You know, Delph, friends don’t behave like you do. You don’t eat friends. They help one another, like we did. So what’s it going to be? Friendship or . . .” She glanced upwards, but said nothing more.

Delph gulped. He started to speak but Buttons’s weight, slight as it was, prohibited him saying much. She jumped to the ground and sat beside Sally, the two waiting to hear what he had to say.

“It won’t matter what I say, if it’s simply to eliminate a threat.” He glanced upward, but his demeanor had changed. He was different and thinking differently than ever before.

Milo grinned knowingly at the two small dogs who faced the alligator alone as he stepped aside. It was their show.

Delph grinned in appreciation. “I’ve never had a friend, much less any like you all. I have sort of fended for myself, and when I escaped, I vowed to never get caught again and to have nothing to do with anyone else. They never lived long anyway.” He drooped at the sad thoughts racing through his mind.

Buttons spoke up as she watched the transformation taking place before her. “We’ll be your friends and we are not about to disappear. You’ll have a lot of friends here. But you have to learn the rules of the swamp. It won’t be easy.”

“Gosh,” Delph said as he looked from Buttons to Sally. “You really mean it, don’t you?”

Now, it would be unfair to suggest that Delph lacked a sense of gratitude, or that he harbored and thoughts of treachery. However, it had been a long day; his stomach was growling unmercifully, and well, alligators are still alligators. His honor should not be impugned at this time either, for clearly, he was not acting in the least bit precipitously, considering his inner turmoil, and his great brown eyes contained no hint of Machiavellian cunning. He was simply hungry, and now to make it worse, he was facing a situation he had never thought about. Friends? Actual friends with whom he could talk.

He wanted to cry, but he didn’t. He was an alligator, after all. He simply nodded. “I’ll do it. I’ll be the best friend you ever had.” He looked at Ssserek and Milo. “Really, I mean it. I promise.”

Buttons hopped on Delph’s snout and stalked up to his eyes, peering intently into each, one at a time. “I believe you.”

Ssserek interjected softly, “Delph, you must do as you promise. You can’t win with this bunch otherwise. You do know that?”

Delph grinned hugely, with real joy lighting his eyes. “Yes, yes, I do know. And, thank you all.” His nodding in agreement to Ssserek made Buttons bounce up and down, and at the same time, sat Sally back on her back.

They all laughed aloud, Milo’s bellow shaking the nearest trees and making the forest ring. Buttons slid off after one more lick which made Delph blink with sudden emotion.

Milo turned and began making his way back to the grazing field when Buttons and Sally stopped him with a shout. Racing up to him, they both sat

before him and stammered their thanks.

“It was very kind of you, Milo,” said Sally.

“We’ll see you again, soon?” asked Buttons.

Delph made his way up to them. “You were great, Milo. You all are.”

Milo would have blushed had he been able to do so. Instead, he bowed, first to Ssserek and then to the two dogs whose eyes glittered with emotion and appreciation. Finally, he nodded to Delph, whose tail thumped the ground in pure happiness and joy.

Delph nodded to the two dogs. “I have to leave now, if you don’t mind.” He turned to Milo. He had never thought of it before, but this was the greatest day of his life. He didn’t quite know what to do. Then, he simply blurted out, “I’ve gotten to know the swamp pretty well. Uh, would you like some great food? I know where the biggest patch of swamp grass that ever was is. Unexpected emotion welled up in his chest, but Sally and Buttons were grinning, sharing his emotion and his marvelous intent. “Well, you know what I mean.” Delph’s voice dwindled as he looked at the moose.

Milo grinned in return. “I know exactly what you mean. Lead the way, old buddy. We both have some eating to do.”

Buttons and Sally watched with mixed emotions as the two moved swiftly offshore. They couldn’t follow, but it had been a swell day. One that they would not forget. Both made their way to Ssserek where he lay coiled. “I guess its time for us to go, too, Ssserek. Thanks again.”

He watched their rapid departure. He looked out over the quiet swamp, listening to the small sounds of bird and insect. “Yessss, time to call it quits,” he sighed.

The End



# Buttons and Great Horde of Rats

Buttons had gone to her favorite spot in the Great Field early in the afternoon, expecting to meet Sally, her beagle friend. Ssserek, the great serpent was not present, so she sat, watching and listening. The wind was low and brought few messages with it. The Great Forest in the distance was silent. It was too early for the hawks to be soaring overhead. Even the bugs were few. Quiet, it was so quiet that she finally lay down.

But she really didn't want to, and moved about restlessly. The dreaded dreams had returned; they were increasingly difficult to manage by herself. Sally's absence made it ever harder, more difficult than ever before. She didn't like them, and shrank from the night, fearing that when she slept, they would be there. But she was young, and like the young, must sleep when fatigued. And, she had become very fatigued of late. She started to lie down, but got up again and moved about the rocky knoll, sniffing here and there, trying to forget, trying to keep her mind off the dreams. She sat once again, only to stand, stretch, and then yawn. What was keeping Sally? Buttons needed her now, but she was late.

She moved to the flattest part of the small knoll, where Ssserek liked to sun himself in the afternoons. She sat as a butterfly flitted slowly by, turning and twisting as they did. She lay down as she watched the small bug moved about, just in front of her nose. She slept.

Like the butterfly in flight, her dreams were erratic at first, but then she began to run. Anywhere, it didn't matter, she had to get away.

Run, Buttons, run. His high-pitched squeal urged her on. Run, little dog, run.

She was running, running as fast as her heart could bear, running, and running. But she didn't seem to move. The horizon was flat and brown,

wavering ever so slightly. Strange, there was no sound, but the bushes swayed, their limbs swinging to and fro in what must be a strong wind. But there was none. No noise, no wind. Just running, and running, and running. She couldn't stop, or the pain would begin. She couldn't look behind. They might be there. Her legs moved, her nose was to the ground, but the rocks and dust were always the same. They never changed. They were always in the same spot. Great rocks, towering over her, small rocks and stones spread among the bushes, dust hanging in the air, clogging her nose. Her chest hurt, her breathing became faster and faster. Still nothing happened. She hesitated. She couldn't keep on going. She must stop.

She glanced behind. And then, they were there. Red eyes, small at first, unwinking, red eyes growing larger and larger. They were following. They were catching up. She cried out. But no sound escaped her lips. She shuttered as she began to run faster again, faster and faster. The world was smooth, flat, all the same around her. Just the eyes and Buttons. Angry eyes, evil eyes, mean eyes. They didn't blink. They just stared at her as they filled the sky. The horizon disappeared into red, unblinking eyes. They began to whirl and eddy around her. The bushes reached for her, red, angry eyes hanging from them, whipping to and fro in their evil hatred of all life but their own.

The eyes began to change, drifting toward one another. They merged, melting into one another, slowly at first, and then faster, and faster, and faster, keeping pace with the small dog's flashing legs. Then, they moved ahead. Laughter, evil laughter was there. Though she couldn't hear it, she could feel it. She wanted to cringe, but wouldn't. They would never make her do that. She started to lift her head, to slow down, but couldn't. The eyes wouldn't let her as they swiftly became one, a single large red, angry eye. Then suddenly there were two, flanking a long, gray snout, surrounded by grinning teeth. No, not that. There were fangs, and then teeth, flashing back and forth beneath the two unblinking eyes.

A rat—thin, ribs prominent in his scrawny sides, his belly shrunken with hunger—stood before her. Buttons attacked without thinking, her sharp teeth ripping a scream of pain from the rat. It whirled and tried to toss her

off, but she hung on tenaciously, digging her paws into the ground, forcing the rat down onto its side.

Then, he, the Great Rat leader, was there. She let go of the first and attacked, even though he was as big as she was. He smelled dead and moldy. Large, gray, with unblinking, evil, red eyes, he smelled, always the same. Loathsome creature though he was, he was strong, and her leap barely budged him. Suddenly, she was pulled off the rat by another, and was surrounded by many rats who laughed and tittered to one another in their cruel language. Their eyes were red, and as the rats hunched down, they waited, daring her to come at them again. The first rat slunk back into the crowd, his tail dragging on the ground in defeat.

The King Rat was the largest rat of all, and he smiled all of the time, his teeth and eyes glittering as he watched her. He moved through the other rats as though they weren't there. At first, he said nothing, but when he did, it was a whispering hiss, laughter, in the back of his throat, hatred in his eyes.

The other rats began to chitter as he spoke. "Well, what do we have here, my friends?" He would swing his head from side to side each time he said something, waiting for the others' hateful responses. "My, but what a big puppy we have here. How grown she is, sending one of us sneaking off with his tail on the ground." His voice rose in a shriek. "You'll regret that, little puppy!" His voice suddenly dropped and he looked at her again, his eyes never leaving hers. They were horrible, the meanness, and, yes, the hunger, that was always there.

Buttons was small and scared. Terror was beginning to grow deep inside. But she ignored it as she stared into the red eyes before her. She would not back down, but attack him she did, even biting him on his foreleg. But he was big and strong. Still, he squealed. And then they were all on her, or at least that's how it felt. He shouted them into order before she knew what was going on. He limped over to her, slowly walking around. She tried to turn to face him, but two big rats wouldn't let go of her, each holding onto a shoulder. Their teeth, sharp and strong, hurt. But she didn't say anything; she wouldn't give them any satisfaction. Then at his

command, they began to race in at her, several at a time, nipping her as they did so. She fought back, returning bite for bite, until she could no longer move, her muscles twitching with fatigue. She sat, but would not go down on all four, turning her head back and forth, daring as best she could any who would approach her again.

Hurting all over, the terror inside grew until she thought she would faint from it alone. The rats, too, were tired of their game, though their laughter never let up. The King Rat had sat off to one side, watching, and then returned to face her.

“Bite me, will you!” He chuckled to himself, as though it were all a joke. She thought it was to himself and the others. “No, fun though this has been, I think there’s a better way in which to make an impression on one so young and ferocious.

“*Do it now!*” He suddenly shouted at the two large rats. They grabbed her again, this time by either side of her neck as another grabbed her tail. There was a terrible pain. And then, they were all laughing at her, pointing at her tail.

Her tail hung limply, broken in several places, blood dripping to the brown earth. She turned and turned again, trying to see it, but could not. Then she ran, bursting through the crowd of rats, their laughter filling her head, their eyes again whirling in the air. She ran and ran. But whether it was from the rats or her broken and bleeding tail, she could not tell.

Buttons lay on her side, her legs twitching, her ears laid back against her smooth, rounded head. She whimpered in her sleep, and then began to snarl as a small red-and-white beagle rushed up the hill. It was Sally, and she stopped abruptly as she saw her best friend beginning to snarl. Sally moved forward quietly, until she stood beside Buttons. The beagle was worried, worried about her best friend and what was happening elsewhere. Well, first things first.

Sally gently nudged Buttons, poking her in the side, very gently at first, and then with greater urgency, whuffing as she did so. Buttons’s legs stopped, pawing the air, and her breath came more slowly. The Scottie dog’s

ears perked up, and then her eyes opened. Then she leaped to her feet, snarling at Sally as though she still confronted the rat. But as full consciousness returned, she dropped her head, shame rushing over her like a blanket of fear. Trembling, she looked at her best friend, Sally. Seeing her for the first time, Buttons spoke.

“Oh, Sally, it’s so awful, so terribly awful. Every time. Every time I sleep, he’s there, laughing at me as they did that awful day the rats caught me.” She sighed deeply. “That day.”

Sally knew exactly what Buttons was speaking about, as Buttons had told her many times what had happened.

“That awful day, Sally. When they broke my tail.”

She would not look backward, knowing all too well what she would see. A broken and twisted tail. It was hateful. And it had been painful, as the evil, grinning Great Rat leader made sure.

Sally nudged her, shoulder to shoulder, rubbing her head against Buttons’s head. There was nothing to be said, Sally knew that, and did what she did best—quietly reassure her best friend with her presence, her gentle touch.

Buttons stood, and, taking a deep breath, said, “I won’t forget. But, he will not beat me. Not even in my dreams.” She looked hard at Sally. “I’m sorry to always be such a nuisance. But, but, well . . .”

Sally grinned. This was more like it. Buttons would recover fully from the dream. And, in time, to get on with more problems.

Slowly, Buttons stopped shivering as Sally walked shoulder to shoulder with her, reassuring her again and again. Sally was slightly taller than Buttons, and whereas Sally had slender legs which one day would carry her swiftly wherever she went, Buttons was stocky, and for a female Scottie, broad in the shoulders. Both were young and greatly appreciated by the inhabitants of the field and forest for their adventurous spirits and their ability to deal with problems others could not manage. Being young, their spirits were typically high and sometimes mischievous. Buttons recovered

quickly. Clearly, Sally was deeply concerned about something. Something that would test both spirit and mind. Nightmares would have to wait.

Buttons turned to Sally, questions in her eyes.

Sally nodded and then answered without being asked. "We have real problems. Well, anyway, the otters do. Something terrible has happened. They need us. Now."

Wasting no time for further discussion, both headed south towards the running river which lay at the edge of the Great Forest. Sally and Buttons broke through the forest brambles and up to the edge of the river. Two very large adult otters watched them from the opposite bank, sitting upright so nothing escaped their attention. Although the otter parents were very careful in the education of their young, playtime was theirs alone. But today, things were different, and Buttons and Sally had immediately sensed it. Something was wrong.

They turned and moved parallel to the river, several of the younger otters matching the two dogs' pace easily in the water. Reaching the dam of the beaver tribe, they carefully made their way across, being particularly careful to disturb nothing. The beavers tolerated the two, but were short-tempered at the best of times. And this was not a good time. The sense of wrong and terrible deeds hung heavily in the early morning sun which filtered through the overhanging branches.

Buttons and Sally approached the elder otters cautiously. Although very good friends with one of the younger otters, Dodger, this was no time for games. Dodger sat at one side, his silence a warning greater than action or words. He simply stared at his two friends as they approached shoulder to shoulder, inseparable friends. The two, Scottie and beagle, stopped short of the two magnificent otters. Sleek and immaculately groomed as they were, they frowned, and the larger male actually bared fangs, something that Buttons and Sally had never witnessed before in all of their many visits and many pranks among their good friends, the young otters.

The female of the pair simply stated in muted tones, "One of the small ones disappeared two days ago."

Buttons and Sally gasped. Sally blurted out, “You mean one of them drowned? Haven’t you looked downstream? That’s terrible.”

The older and larger male dropped to all fours, glaring at the small beagle, his eyes burning into the beagle’s. “No, that’s not what’s meant. One of them was taken. Taken right out of the den, at night, when his father and mother were absent for a few minutes.”

It was Sally’s turn to frown with horror and disbelief. Never in her experience had anything like it ever happened. She couldn’t believe it and wanted to know more.

Buttons stared in fascinated horror also, not knowing what to do. She glanced over at Dodger who still sat, quietly watching the two. He had not moved forward.

“Surely,” thought the beagle to herself, “he cannot believe we had anything to do with it.”

But this was a ghastly occurrence. The otters were jealously protective of their young who freely roamed the river and its banks, oftentimes in the presence of the two dogs. Their parents had never interfered before, though it was quite uncommon for any other creatures to join the otters in ramblings along the river.

Stepping before the elders, both dogs nodded as Buttons carefully and respectfully addressed them. “Obviously, something terrible has happened. We will do what we can to help resolve the situation.”

The two elders sat upright again, and surveyed the two with sharp eyes and keen wits. They needed all the help they could muster, but these two young dogs. That was a matter for due consideration, but both knew there was no time for that. They quickly made up their minds.

“Quickly follow us.” The two elders moved off, followed by Buttons and Sally, glancing worriedly at one another. Dodger and two young otters followed at a distance, curiosity and fear making them watch the forest more carefully than ever before.

A muskrat slowly moved out of his den as they passed. He peered suspiciously at the group and chirped a short question, and then moved in line behind the small group.

Their goal lay at the far end of the row of dens, and both Buttons and Sally immediately moved forward to survey the surrounding wood which was quite close. The otters had stopped and allowed the two dogs to investigate on their own. They knew that while their own noses were very good, these two excelled.

Sally moved toward the wood as Buttons carefully slipped into the den, closely followed by the two inhabitants who immediately placed themselves before their newborn. They intently watched every move, their muscles bunched in anxiety.

Buttons slowly circumnavigated the deep and comfortable den, ignoring the parents guarding their newest litter, now smaller by the absence of one. Her nose close to the ground, she slowly moved about, stopping and sniffing more closely at displaced leaves. There was a musty odor. A feeling of fear began to grow in the midst of her belly, slowing growing as she continued to move about.

Yes. There it was again, nearer the litter. Stronger, too. The sensation of evil crawled up her spine, the hackles rising involuntarily along her back. The otter parents sensed something was wrong, but could not identify it. The small dog's composure was rapidly disappearing as she moved toward the litter.

The parents glanced at one another as Buttons moved past them, not seeing the two in her concentration. She sniffed once, and then slowly took a deep breath, containing within it the sweet odor of the newborn otters and something else. She gently nudged a newborn to one side and sniffed deeply again.

Buttons's eyes were large in her head as she turned to meet the worried expressions of parents and the elder otters who had moved in to observe the Scottie's actions. Buttons had dropped her head to the ground once again after the first glance.



Stiff-legged, she moved by the otters, her nose following a trail neither otter nor dog could see, but one which was all to clear to the keen nose of Buttons, who was beginning to tremble with deep emotion. That emotion was becoming increasingly evident to the worried otters.

Buttons left the den and turned to the wood as Sally reappeared. She, too, like Buttons, was gripped by emotion and almost slipped into the river in her anxiety to reach her best friend.

The elder male otter wore streaks of silver fur on his face. His features were blank, and he said nothing. As the two dogs reached one another, his lips slowly curled upward and backward, baring large, white fangs. The normally smooth features became increasingly gaunt and fearful as the emotions emanating from the two dogs closed around him. The hair on his nape slowly rose as he moved forward to sit beside Buttons and Sally.

Sally turned to him, having to sit so that she could more clearly see his features. "Sir, Buttons knows what happened. She immediately recognized the smell."

The large otter raised himself to scan the wood, and then quickly lowered himself to all fours and moved toward Buttons who was sniffing audibly, scanning back and forth, anxiety clearly written in her quick side-to-side movements. Her small feet were a blur of movement as she covered the ground about the den and between den and forest. She was snarling and her fangs were clearly visible. Anger and fear were readily evident.

As the otter's approach caught her attention, she stopped. Though small, her defiance and anger were admirable. He paused as she slowly relaxed and the glitter in her eyes ebbed.

"You smell better than we, even after two suns have moved by. What is it that so disturbs you, little one?" The elder otter's head moved to and fro, seeking to find what disturbed the small Scottie. "Please, it is our river and our young who are endangered. Share with us what you have found."

His voice was low. Nice things were not happening. The otters moved closer to hear better. Sally waited for Buttons to speak.

Buttons looked up and at the same time began to tremble. She then moved further from the group of young ones. Turning, she addressed the elder otter. Her voice was taut and closely controlled.

She hissed, "The rat. He is back." She could say no more at the moment as her strength almost gave out, Sally's shoulder giving her more confidence than Buttons felt.

The elder knew the young dog in front of him was fearless and to see her fear made him shiver inwardly. There was more here than he and his group had suspected, and he began to wonder if he had made a mistake in not making the loss of a young one more widely known. But nothing had ever disturbed his group's peace. The River Running was always there and had been the same in his memory. Now, something of which he knew nothing was intruding itself. He looked back at the row of dens along the riverbank. This was his home, nothing could be allowed to disturb it. But he felt helpless, only the two stalwart dogs standing between his clan and a danger unknown.

He turned and lifted his silver snout to the sky and whistled a pure, rich sound that carried to all corners of the river and its inhabitants. Peremptorily, he summed the other elders. They needed to know. Noses and then eyes, followed by the sleek bodies of young and elder otters emerged from the many dens. Some slithered into the water to swiftly make their way upstream, others simply ran as never before, their supple bodies moving gracefully in their leaping, scrambling rush to answer the sudden and unexpected summons. They gathered around, on all sides, shoving and pushing to be near their leader.

Others came as well. Muskrat and beaver moved more slowly, but they got there. Deer peered with frightened eyes from dense thickets as a small bear rolled into view, splashing into the river. Birds appeared in the sky and settled on nearby limbs of bush and tree. Even a rabbit or two dared to move into the sunlight, their long ears twitching to and fro to catch the least word.

As the many animals swarmed about the elder, he motioned them to silence, indicating by a nod where they were to sit.

Sally moved alongside Buttons and pressed next to her friend's side. The elder looked down on the two dogs.

His voice was low and his fear and worry showed clearly on his aged features. There were many, and not all young, who shivered at his appearance. "Buttons," he asked, "what is it? What's wrong? Who is this rat?"

Buttons moved forward to stand before the elder, her head high, her eyes flashing in anger. Her tone was firm and her words carried to all inhabitants of the forest, field, and river present at that fateful moment.

"It is The Rat." She stopped momentarily to reconsider. "No, it is the rats, all of them. And, there are many, indeed. This is not the first time they have entered the forest, but always before it has been unknown, except to a few. They are many and they are evil, cruel, and strong. They will dare anything. As you have suffered, so will others."

At this announcement, there was a sudden rush of words from other creatures of the forest. A squirrel who sat on a limb of a tree overhanging the river cried out. "My little one. He disappeared several days ago. Oh, oh, oh," she wailed, unable to say more. Birds ruffled wings angrily, their sharp words coming like spears, stabbing at the crowded river creatures. "My eggs were stolen . . . Oh, my babies. Last week, it happened, our nest was robbed also . . ." And so it went, until the elder otter whistled them all into silence.

Buttons looked around and up at the trees. "Yes, that is what they will do. They will steal eggs and young ones. They fear nothing or no one when in great numbers. We are all threatened. All creatures of the forest and field, and, yes, river, too."

She stopped as several birds and other forest creatures hurried away to spread the word, and, more importantly, to protect their nests and dens.

Nothing could stop them, and neither Sally nor Buttons could had they wanted to.

The elder otter looked down on the small dog. “How do you know all this? How did you come by such evil news?”

Buttons shuddered, her recurrent nightmares very fresh in her mind. Sally nudged her.

“Go on, tell them. They all need to know.”

Buttons looked at her closest friend and gulped, her insides churning. Then in a clear voice which broke only once, she told of her meeting with King Rat and his evil and cruel minions. She left nothing out. She described his cruel and vicious minions, their mean and twisted souls, their lust to kill and destroy. She told of the attack and said little of her attack and defense, though many could supply what was unsaid as they watched the anguish and pain of the small and brave Scottie. She relived the pain of her tail being broken and bloodied. She told of the many days that followed as her tail healed, the slow healing that left her tail curled against her rounded rump, ugly and twisted, never again to joyously fly above her back as she dashed through the forest.

She finished, “I remember his odor as though he were standing in front of me . . .” She sighed and looked about her.

Angry words came from all directions. Words of fear also were there, and doubt. The otters began to gather around their elder as other creatures began to do the same. Sally and Buttons looked at one another, and then Buttons took a deep breath. She did not want to say it, but it was necessary.

“There is no time for each clan to act by themselves. They will take all of us. All. One by one in the stealth and darkness of night, or during the day, if they must. Do you understand? No one can stand aside.” She stepped to a higher knob of the slopes of the river. “First,” Buttons said, “we warn everyone on the river.”

She looked to the young Dodger, the otter. “Off you go, take some friends. If you see Ms. Lucie, let her know everything immediately. She and

the other birds see more of what passes in the forest than anyone else, though they don't share much information with us."

Buttons and Sally glanced at the otters and then were off to the shallow ford below the dam. Over their shoulder, they shouted, "We've got to find Ssserek!"

Before Dodger had time to answer or approach the elders, the two pups had disappeared into the forest.

Dodger quickly moved toward the eldest of the elders, and sitting quietly, coughed gently to catch their attention. The eldest was silver from snout to shoulders, and he turned slowly. His eyes were deep brown, and within their depths lay much experience, knowledge, and were it known, humor.

"Well, Dodger, get on with it. We don't have all day."

Dodger was taken by surprise. "Get, get, get," he stuttered.

"On with it," replied the eldest. "Get your group together and get the message out. We serve the river, you know. No dallying. Move!"

He chuckled as Dodger grinned back in sudden comprehension.

Then Dodger moved with the lithe quickness of his kind, rapidly gathering his peers around him. Then, they all moved, some up the river, some down. There was urgency in their swiftness, but no stumbling or fumbling. They knew what had to be done. Like Buttons and Sally. They had a message to carry, and they would.

Even as Dodger disappeared into the depths of the river, Sally's bugling could be heard in the distance, calling all creatures to Ssserek's rock. As Buttons and Sally made their way through the forest, now and again they stopped so that Sally could catch her breath before sending out her piercing bugle. It was not long before reached the clearing in which Ssserek's rock was to be found. They hurried to the top to find both Ssserek and Ms. Lucie, a small sparrow of great wisdom and experience, waiting for them.

Buttons wasted no time but rushed up the small knob of a hill to the great flat stone on top. Ssserek lay coiled up, with Ms. Lucie perched comfortably on one as she and Ssserek spoke. Both looked down on the two pups as they appeared. Buttons breathlessly spoke to the two.

“Ssserek, we need your help, both of you. The rats are out. We must stop them.”

“Easy, my little one, Ms. Lucie and I were just discussing the recent depredations in the forest and field when we heard Sally’s summoning bugle. Well done.”

“But, Ssserek, you will help, won’t you?” Buttons’s tone was desperate. Under normal circumstances, Ssserek, the great serpent spent his time alone. Few creatures dare approach the rattlesnake; fewer still had any desire to do so, although all recognized his great knowledge. Buttons and Sally were the only two creatures who were to be found in his presence on any given day.

The great snake sighed. He and Ms. Lucie were just discussing the matter for both knew of the intrusion of the rats. Ssserek, of all creatures, knew them well, having met them at night as they crept about on their nefarious deeds. None survived such meetings, but it was not in his nature to pursue the matter further. The snake clan stayed to itself, having little commerce with others. He paused as he gazed down on the two small dogs, his eyes staring past them as he thought of his first meeting with Buttons. He sighed a second time. There would be no saying no to this smallest of Scotties.

As Buttons began to bounce back and forth before him, Ssserek smiled slowly. He sighed for the third, and last, time.

Ms. Lucie smiled to herself, recognizing the interplay taking place before her. Buttons’s boundless energy transmitted itself to everyone around her. Ssserek was needed and Buttons was the only one who could engage his fullest attention at such a time.

Ssserek lifted his head, looking about as other creatures began to make their way into the clearing. He looked at Buttons and Sally, Buttons moving back and forth in her ceaseless and youthful impatience.

“Yesssss,” he said slowly, “I will help. I have met them. What will you have me do?”

Buttons and Sally leaped upon him, joy in their voices. They turned to view the many animals slowly filling the clearing. Deer, rodent, and birds. Their leaders came, grudgingly in some cases, but they came. Soon, all were in deep conversation as Buttons and Sally spoke of the happenings along the river. Ssserek and Ms. Lucie spoke and everyone listened. Ssserek’s concern was far greater than anyone knew. He spoke of the Great Swamp, the dark depths of which held Rat Island, until recently the only gathering place for the rat clan. Few could approach it and live. Fewer still wanted to see it, or its inhabitants.

Many of the larger creatures moved away from the clearing. Certainly, they had nothing to fear from rats, but the urgency in Buttons’ voice kept them near. They would at least listen before going their own way. This was no concern of theirs.

Three woverines slowly moved forward, Their long coats brushed the ground with each step. The largest and the one with grayest snout led and then moved in front, parting the other creatures like a dreadnaught of old. He paused, and bowing to Ssserek, raised his head. He spoke quietly as was his habit, but his words carried to all. “We are few in number, but we know the rats for what they are. We fight!”

Ssserek nodded and went on.

“The message must go out. Everyone must know, creatures small and large, for the rats would not hesitate to attack even the larger creatures if the rats were in large numbers.”

As Ssserek and Ms. Lucie spoke, all listened. Ms. Lucie represented all birds, and her message was most urgent. She must know what was going

on. Although most birds had little to do with those who walked on four legs, their vision was keen and they must share their sightings.

And so the message went out far and wide, Buttons and Sally leading the way throughout the day and into the night.

Across the fields and the Great Forest, even across the Great Swamp itself, the message went out. Deep into the forest and swamp it went. All small creatures, rodents, and others gathered and talked. They had the most to fear.

The birds, at Ms. Lucie's encouragement, became increasingly involved and their patrols could be seen passing to and fro overhead. Squirrels, chipmunks, gophers, field mice, and others watched and listened. Nights were long and the usual rustlings and movements were quieted.

All the wild hogs and peccaries, Biff the bear and his kin, the deer, and others soon became more involved. No one could be left out. None were.

Still, even with the best of watchfulness, the depredations against the young ones continued. The soft chirruping call for a lost young one could be heard each morning. Even the birds in their nests were not immune. Ducks, geese, and other water birds suffered the greatest losses, their precious eggs disappearing with regularity. Fox, ferret, and coyote began to patrol the edges of ponds, their appetites whetted on an anger never before experienced, honed by the carnage about them.

Buttons and Sally were everywhere, speaking to everyone they met. Natural enemies must come together. The attacks were tearing the very fabric of the forest, field, and river apart. The loss of young ones would deplete the forest and field of all life. The loss of beavers threatened water supplies of the herds of mustangs and other larger animals. Small pools of once clean and clear water were being fouled by the rats. Diseases heretofore unknown were beginning to appear.

Rodents of the fields, like the water birds, suffered untold deaths. Even fawns had been attacked by increasingly larger groups of rats who would suddenly leap upon the sleeping creature in the still of the night, ripping the



life from the young before the doe could react. Rabbits were pursued into their complex warrens, prairie dog towns disappeared, and increasingly, bold, single rats could be seen during the day, insolently sitting in open areas, sunning themselves where once the young innocently played.

Nightly, Buttons and Sally patrolled the fields to listen to the messages and words being passed across the land. Even their keen ears could not pick up the passage of small feet and hungry, red eyes that moved closer and closer to the Great Field.

Then one day, they were moving toward the forest along a well-known trail when suddenly their passage was blocked by the enormous figure of their friend, Biff, the black bear.

He woofed gently as his short-sighted eyes peered down at them. He knew them well, but still his bulk prevented their movement forward along the trail.

“Hey, what’s up, Biff?,” they said together, wonder and worry in their voices. “What do you think you’re doing? Let us by.”

“Can’t,” he answered, still sitting squarely in their way. “Orders, you know.”

Buttons cocked one eyebrow as she inspected the bear, bulging with spring’s first berries. “Whose orders?” She waited as the bear looked around, scanning the bushes, then the trees.

“Well, it’s this way. Ssserek told me to patrol this trail. So, I’m patrolling it.” With a wicked gleam of humor in his eyes, he couldn’t help but add, “And you.”

Buttons moved up to sit before Biff’s nose. “Look, fatso, no one’s told us anything about big, porky old bears telling us what to do.”

Then, she darted to one side as Sally took the other. But as quickly as the two could move, Biff was faster. Sweeping out his great limbs and fanning his claws, he deftly gathered them in as a child would his favorite toys.

“Umph, ouch. Watch it, you great, big lout. Hey, that hurts,” they shouted as they were thumped together, again just in front of Biff’s nose.

He snickered, “Not too bad for a fat porker, my chowder-headed little friends, now, was it?”

He poked Sally with one great curving claw, making her jump to one side as best she could. He never really appreciated his own strength, but the two dogs did, having in the past experienced it when roughhousing with him.

Buttons stood up, placing her paws on his snout. Looking him squarely in the eyes, she addressed Biff with her best commanding voice, “Let’s not be boorish, my fat-headed friend. Let us by. We’ve got things to do.”

He snorted, causing Buttons to bounce backwards, tumbling into a heap beside a disgruntled Sally. They exchanged glances, and then more meekly approached Biff.

“Come on, Biff. Just what’s going on? How about it, huh? Really, we need to go into the forest today.”

“Not today, or tomorrow, or the next. Not until I’ve got orders.”

Biff sat up, his stern expression being replaced by the wide jovial countenance they knew so well.

“Look, you two. You can’t go in.”

“But why not?”

They were surprised. Now that pleasantries had been exchanged in the usual and customary fashion, it was time to get down to business.

Biff looked about with humor in his eyes. “I was told to guard, and I’m going to guard.”

“Look,” he repeated, “Ssserek said you can’t go in.”

“Oh,” was all they could manage while they assimilated this new datum.

Biff went on. “He said you’re not allowed in. At least not until we know more about what’s going on.”

“But why not,” asked Sally. “We know every inch of the forest. We can go places where you and others can’t.”

“Precisely the point. But, *they* can, too. Ssserek said so.” For Biff, that finished the matter.

Both Buttons and Sally knew better than to force the issue, but their curiosity was aroused. They wanted to know more. Besides, there was something fishy here, and they meant to find out.

Biff was happy to expand on the topic because he truly liked this pair, for all their snide comments about his bulk.

“If I can find you this easily, they can, too.”

Sally looked at Buttons quizzically. “Just how did you find us,” she asked Biff.

“Hey, I’m good. You know how smart we bears are.”

Buttons guffawed, making Biff frown.

“You are fantastic about a lot of things. But you couldn’t trail your own tail around a tree.”

This made Sally giggle, but they both had to leap backwards as Biff flopped down in front of them.

One lip curled as he responded, “Circumspect, as usual, Buttons?”

Biff grinned, knowing the word *circumspect* meant caution but implied looking around.

They all joined in the laughter at the play of words. This was a game they could enjoy, excelling as they did at it.

Sally broke in, “You’re skirting the issue, Biff.”

Once again, laughter broke out. As Biff’s sides heaved with mirth, the two dogs suddenly broke in two directions again, only to be ignominiously

returned to a scrambling dusty heap of legs and painful cries.

Biff puffed more dust into their faces as he said, “I know your circumlocutions (evasions in speech, but again meaning *speaking around*) too well for such nonsense.” Again, he huffed and chuckled in mirth at his comment, making both Sally and Buttons snort in disgust. They had been had, literally, and they knew it. But, they knew it had been worth the try.

The rotund figure of Biff rose to sit once again. Then, his expression changed as a look of deep concern crossed his features. Buttons immediately sensed something was wrong.

She stalked up to the bear and sat before him, motioning him to lie down so that she could see his face better. Biff shuffled his feet and looked about, but finally did as she commanded.

“OK, out with it. Just whose idea was this in the first place?”

Biff heaved a deep sigh and looked sheepishly at the two. “Well,” he began, “Ssserek did tell me to guard this trail. They’re all being watched, you know.”

It was Sally’s turn to frown.

“Look,” he said, “you’re too important to us to allow you to go messing with rats in the forest. I . . . well, Ssserek did tell me to guard this trail,” he finished lamely as his shoulders slumped.

It was Buttons’s turn to frown and reconsider what had happened. Yes, they had fun with Biff, but his concern was obvious.

“Are the rats being seen in greater numbers?” Her question was to-the-point and Biff could not evade it. He knew it, too.

“Yes,” he said as he gazed in his short-sighted fashion at the two before him. They meant a great deal to him. He was reluctant to let them go into the forest by themselves. But, Ssserek’s orders had been very explicit to all those creatures given the responsibility of watching different areas of the forest. He couldn’t leave his post, but he didn’t want to leave these two either.

“Yes,” he repeated. “There are more and they are doing more evil things. It’s very dangerous until we know more. Right now, Ms. Lucie and Rarebit, the frog have shared their maps of the swamp with Ssserek and others. The swamp folk know and watch with us, for if the truth were to be really known, they have suffered the worst of all. They have almost totally left the dark corner to the rats, but all approaches are being manned and guarded. Anyway . . .” He was about to continue when a voice addressed them from a limb just above their heads.

Ms. Lucie’s voice was soft but magisterial. Her eyes glittered with humor and appreciation of the exchange to which she had listened in its entirety. She was a small, neat, and very prim sparrow who took no sauce from anyone. The blue jays and cardinals could bully birds smaller than them and would chase others from the bird feeders kept by many people who lived near the Great Field and Forest. But none approached Ms. Lucie except respectfully, and the thought of threatening her never entered anyone’s mind. Well, at least none ever mentioned it aloud. None dared.

“If you three are quite finished with your games, Ssserek is waiting for you on his favorite sunning rocks.” She smiled to herself as she thought of Rarebit, the frog, the navigationally oriented frog who spent all of his time charting every nook and cranny of the Great Swamp. No one knew it better than him. At this critical time, Rarebit’s unique hobby would prove to be invaluable.

All three of the young gulped. They liked and sincerely respected Ms. Lucie, but you never knew when she would show up.

“Off with you.”

“Needn’t worry, Ms. Lucie, we’ll be circumspect.” Shouts of laughter lingered after them on the warm afternoon air.

She turned to Biff who had regained his composure and was sitting as he intently watched the trail Ms. Lucie watched him closely as she surveyed the surrounding forest. There were many areas in deep shade, some were so darkened that nothing could be seen. She stirred restlessly. Guarding the many paths and trails was very important, but even someone as large as Biff

could be seriously injured if attacked by a large group of rats and taken entirely taken by surprise. She needed to rethink their strategy. One or several birds with each of the four-legged creatures would be better. That would reduce the chances of total surprise and would allow quicker warnings to other guards. The guards needed to be changed more often, too. To be rotated. That would keep the rats guessing more.

Pinning Biff, the bear with her sharpest look, she addressed the surprised bear. “You too, Biff, off with you. You could use the exercise. Circumnavigating the field.” She cocked an eyebrow as Biff began to argue. He ceased immediately.

“Not to worry. I’ll have others here in moments to take your place. I need someone who can move in and out of the forest’s edge more easily. That’s the place for you. Not here, sitting like a bump on a log. You’ll just fall asleep, anyway, fall off and hurt your head.”

Biff would have objected, but knew better than grinning at the prospects of moving about more freely. He turned and ambled off, quickly disappearing into the deep thickets as only a bear can.

Ms. Lucie shook her head. Where would the woods and field be without such as them, she thought to herself. Sighing, she gracefully swooped into the air and headed toward the deeper portions of the forest. Danger lay there and it was up to her and her kind to detect it before it was upon them in force. Fear for what could happen to such as Buttons and Sally, and, yes, even Biff the bear, chilled her to the marrow, and she raised herself above the trees into the sun where she belonged.

Buttons, Sally, Ssserek, and Ms. Lucie were soon in conference on the ragged pile of stone and rocks. Ssserek lay twined about several small stones, their heat radiating into his welcoming bones. His head rested upon a flat, slate-like stone and his deep eyes watched Ms. Lucie with interest. Little escaped these two, and their exchanges were generally rapid, skipping many details which others would have lost themselves in. They understood one another, and it was not necessary to speak to the obvious. Their enemy

was well-known, and both Ssserek and Ms. Lucie respected their being cunning, if not hating their cruel and wanton ways.

Ms. Lucie was speaking.

“I have posted jays, fly catchers, and larks around the entire swamp. The woodpeckers will signal immediately if anything should happen. The red-wing blackbirds sit upon their willow reeds in all shallow bays, keeping watch for any untoward movement. Even the grackles are flying in large numbers over the deeper areas of the swamp. Frogs, toads, and turtles are everywhere, but lay quietly for their kind have suffered unexpected losses these past weeks from the rats taking both the youngest and the infirm eldest.”

Ssserek cocked his head slightly to one side to better view Ms. Lucie. “And the four-legged ones? What do they do?”

“They have the complete plans of Rarebit, the frog. His plans are accurate. Unfortunately, there are uncertainties in them regarding the darkest areas of the south swamp. He dares not go there and too many of his relatives have tried, only never to return. We have shared all of the plans with bear, deer, coyote, and the small creatures who burrow deep beyond the means of even those foul rodents. I believe we will know in time.”

Her voice was hesitant and the uneasiness was there for Ssserek’s keen ears. She ruffled her feathers, bringing herself back to her usual state of calm composure.

Buttons rose and moved about restlessly, her pacing anxiously followed by the other three. They knew she was deeply concerned for all of the young and old who had been lost. As young and rash as she could be, at this time, she was learning to think, and to think hard and well. She had two of the finest teachers available.

Buttons stopped before Ssserek and sat, looking from him to Ms. Lucie, and then to Sally. “But why? Why now? They have always ventured into the forest on rare occasion. But, what are their intentions?”

Ssserek spoke slowly, each word being weighed carefully. “Space, perhaps. Others have taken aggressive actions to increase their space within both the forest and field. Hunger. The few seen have been thin, willing to attack even those much bigger and stronger.”

It was Ms. Lucie’s turn to speculate. “Rat Island may not be able to support those now there. Rats are destructive creatures, even to their own nests. Perhaps, their numbers have increased too quickly of late. That has happened, as we all know, to the deer who suffer terribly at such times. Unable to find sufficient space or enough food for the increasing numbers.”

Sally had perked up her ears at the discussion and then interjected, “Personally, I think they are simply the meanest possible creatures and look to conquer the forest and field to have to themselves. Selfishness is considered a strength in their clan.”

Ssserek smiled briefly. “Think harshly of them as you will. But, be careful. Do not underestimate them, whatever their motives, however mean, or cruel, or foul they may be.”

Sally spoke up, her thoughts taking a different tack. “Our guards are all out. Are they sufficient in number?”

Ms. Lucie answered. “Yes, all that can be done is being done. I have sent Biff, the bear to the Great Field. Milo, the moose waits quietly. For all his youth and inexperience, he is patience incarnate, like all his kind. Sparrow and mockingbird pass to and fro over the zoo’s grazing field to the south, keeping him posted. Don’t worry.”

At this point, Ms. Lucie was quite confident, and her tone conveyed conviction. Ssserek relaxed ever so slightly. There was still so much to do.

Ignatius, or Iggy, the squirrel, came rushing across the open field to the rocks, hurtling himself up and on to the rocks near Ssserek and Ms. Lucie. All small creatures carefully observed a no-animals policy regarding the rocks, but this was an emergency.

He bobbed his head jerkily to Ssserek and Ms. Lucie and turned to Buttons. “Oh, Buttons,” he said. “Buttons, they’ve attacked Biff. He’s been



hurt awfully bad. He needs you.”

His eyes were pie-shaped circles in his small face as he turned from Buttons to Ssserek. Ms. Lucie gasped, and all of them turned immediately to her.

“Quick, Iggy, where, where did the attack come from?” She fluttered in agitation, hopping up and down. Not waiting for a response, she turned to Ssserek. “It’s my fault. I sent him out.” She whirled on Iggy who leaped backwards, startled by the small sparrow’s actions.

“Well,” she said. “Where?”

“AAh, ah, it was near the edge of the Great Forest. He’s humiliated and angry. Hordes of rats came and attacked all at once. There were so many he couldn’t turn fast enough to stop the bites and slashing. I, I . . .” Iggy stopped and sobbed as grief for his friend overtook him.

“One got on top of his head and tried for his eyes. I don’t think he can see.” He began sobbing uncontrollably, his scrawny shoulders shaking.

Buttons and Sally whirled as one and were ready to hurry to their friend’s aid when Ssserek’s soft and sibilant voice stopped them in their tracks.

“Sssstop. Thissss is no time for that. Iggy, are you sure? How badly is he really hurt? It’s very important.”

Iggy gulped and took a deep breath. “He . . . he’s bleeding badly from his eyebrow on one side. I guess other than that he’s really mad, tearing bushes from the ground in his rage. He’s . . . he’s really mad. I’ve never seen him like that.” Iggy finished, his sharp features fixed on Ssserek’s calm face.

“Sooooo . . . Good. Perhaps it’s not as bad as you think.” He turned to Buttons and Sally.

“Go at once. See what is wrong. We’ll be along as soon as possible. The other elders must know, so be quick.”

Iggy led the way, skipping around and through rock and bush in his normal quick and nimble fashion, the two dogs having little difficulty keeping up. It was further than they had thought, and they arrived panting heavily.

Biff lay curled up in a clump of bushes, quietly licking multiple small wounds on his feet and ankles. His ears had been torn but would heal, clotted blood hiding the worst of the wounds. He turned quickly as he heard their approach and rose to a defensive position in one swift movement. His head hung down, and he stared at them blearily through his right eye only. The left eye was hidden beneath a torn, bloodied eyebrow at which he would paw absent-mindedly now and again. Seeing who it was, he relaxed slightly, but remained on his toes, glancing to his right and left.

Buttons quickly motioned him down. Both her actions and words clearly stated there was no time for recriminations or complaints. The bear did as she indicated.

Buttons and Sally's inspection was as fast as it was thorough. Yes, he had taken a beating. There were many small wounds on any exposed flesh. His thick spring coat had spared him where another creature would have died. The eye needed to be cleaned, but where?

Sally and Buttons moved to one side, leaving Iggy gently patting the bear on his bleeding nose. "I don't know," said Sally. "I just don't know."

Buttons glared at her best friend. "Well, I do."

Just then, Ssserek and Ms. Lucie arrived, the sparrow landing on a bush close by. "And, what do you intend?" Ssserek spoke in a low tone, ignoring the bear and squirrel. "Remember, they're near. And if they will attack a bear, just what chance will you have? Stop and think."

Ms. Lucie spoke up, her voice clear to all there. "Ssserek, you're right. But, there may be other reasons. If they'll attack a bear, they'll stop at nothing. But, more worrisome, why would they attack Biff? No one in his right mind would do that."

Sally and Buttons both started to speak at once. Buttons nodded to Sally, who began, "First, just out of sheer rat meanness. That's their way. Hurt anyway they can, anyone, anywhere." In turn, she nodded toward Buttons.

"I can vouch for that. But more importantly, it could signal a general advance on every animal in the Great Forest and Great Field."

Ms. Lucie sighed, "You're probably right" She looked with great concern to Ssserek. "We must go back to the rock to await the signals from our watchers. Buttons, you and Sally must finish caring for Biff. Rat bites are terrible and may kill without more than a scratch."

Buttons looked at the bird defiantly. "I know what to do. First, the pool of the beavers. We'll take him there. There is no cleaner water in the forest." She turned to Iggy, "Find the otters and have them at the pool as soon as possible." With that, they were off.

Sally and Buttons led the partially blind, limping, and very gruff, young bear toward the river and the beavers' pool. No one knew more about healing than the elder beaver and otter. The two eldest of the females often worked together tending for the injured and hurt. So it was a very tired bear who waded out into the cool waters of the pool and slowly submerged himself in the clear water as several otters and beavers slowly circled him.

The eldest female otter drew near and spoke in her quiet but commanding voice, "Now, take a deep breath and hold it as long as you can while we look over that swollen eye."

Biff could swim very well and did as he was told to, slowly sinking into the depths of the pool.

Sally and Buttons paced up and down at the shore. They knew how bad a rat bite could be. Nothing ever healed properly, it seemed, after a rat had bitten someone. Buttons was becoming angrier and angrier, snarling even at Sally as she tried to cheer her friend up. "Just stay away from me. I've just about had it. Do you understand?" She didn't wait for an answer but began to pace again.

Biff's head slowly emerged from the water, and the two dogs hurried to the shore as both the beaver and otter quickly made their way ahead of him.

The elder otter rose to her full height as she addressed them.

"He is hurt, but will heal in the way of the young. His eye is better than it looks. We cleaned it thoroughly and the beaver will pack it with the proper healing mud. It will remain puffy for a while, but do not worry, he will be in fighting mettle very soon. You did well in getting him here so quickly. Otherwise . . ."

She quit talking as the young bear shook himself off and followed the elder beaver along the shore.

In a cool place, he lay down as demanded, and the beaver went to work, applying a healing poultice to his eye. The otter nodded to the two and moved toward the bear, leaving Buttons and Sally alone, Iggy sitting above them watching with grave concern. He had not spoken during the entire episode, but simply sat wide-eyed as he watched his two best friends.

Buttons turned to Sally, her voice sharp and taut with anger and hatred. "I've had it. I think I know when they will come to shore. Do you remember, after the storm when we went along the swamp and found all of those trees down? How we went out on them with Iggy and the raccoon twins? Remember how far we had gotten before Ms. Lucie caught us and warned us back?" Her eyes glittered as she recalled that day.

Sally watched her friend with growing concern. "Yes, I remember. It would serve as a perfect bridge across that point. But hadn't we better warn Ssserek and Ms. Lucie?"

Buttons frowned. "No time. Besides, as I said, I've had it. I'm heading for the swamp. Now!" She turned to go, then stopped, good sense getting the better of her anger.

"Call the muster. Call it to completion. We meet at Turnkey Bay. Hurry."

Buttons was off, her small, black figure disappearing quickly into the gloomy dark which surrounded the beavers' pool. Sally did as she was asked, and pointing her nose upward, began to bugle. Time and again, her high-pitched bugle sounded, carrying far and wide.

Instantly, a young wolf appeared with a ground-eating lope, his nose telling him exactly where to go. He followed Buttons' tracks as though they were carefully stamped into the ground. She was not to be alone. And no one disobeyed Ssserek's command.

Sally stood still, having finished her task. Then, with Iggy close behind, she turned and followed after Buttons and the wolf.

All the animals came, their passage was swift, if noisy, sending sleeping birds and rodents racing in all directions, some in panic, others in an orderly retreat from the edges of the swamp. Sally's bugle went up again, her cry warning all those who watched that something was amiss. The field and forest awoke with a start. The battle would soon begin.

Buttons made no sounds but read the scents on the air like words in a book. The soft padding sounds of the wolf behind came to her keen ears, but she moved, her anger mounting as she neared the swamp.

Badger, skunk, raccoon, and mink surged up to the bank. Wolf, coyote, and fox ranged further out, keeping pace with ease. The larger of the woodchuck and groundhog slowed and took up their assigned places; they would form a rear guard, ranging back and forth between forest and field. They were not fighters under usual circumstances, but they would go down before allowing any rat to pass through to the defenseless small ones of the field and what lay beyond.

Full-grown bucks and the smaller males among the deer moved to and fro at the edges, their keen senses alert to possible attempts to skirt the defenses being mustered in full force. Only the hardiest and more daring of the rats would attempt to cross the river to the south. Too many and angry and vengeful eyes waited any such occurrence. The distant northern side was barred by the highway and fenced human fields. No, only the forest and field lay before the rats, and that way they were surely approaching.

Red-winged blackbird and morning dove rose into the air. They moved silently to the east, and then to the north, carefully approaching the deeper portions of the old swamp. Faint rustlings came to their sharp ears, but at this time, they could as yet detect no movement. Back and forth they moved, making intricate patterns in the sky.

All around the forest and field, birds were lifting into the air. Their keen vision was desperately needed this day, and they would not fail. Deer moved off silently, taking up the vigil at the periphery of the major action. Their swift speed would be needed to carry messages deep into the forest where birds could not penetrate with ease.

The large bulk of Biff moved south also. He was limping but gallant, one eye closed with poultice, the other glaring with anger. He moved not so swiftly, but his rolling gait covered the ground with amazing alacrity when he felt the need. Today, there was need.

The small rodents of the field and forest also moved south. Although they were little match for the larger rats, they would and could fight when the need was upon them. It was, now. The otters, too, moved toward the swamp. None would escape their attention should they prove foolish enough to move toward the river. The muster went on.

As Ssserek and Ms. Lucie were approaching Turnkey Bay with Rarebit hopping behind, a distant urgent whistle from the sky came down the wind. They moved even more quickly, the clamorous voices of many birds now joining that of the hawk, which soared in the distant sky. Nearly out of sight, the high-pitched whistle came again, urging them to even greater efforts.

The rats had been sighted. Just as Rarebit and Ms. Lucie had surmised, and Buttons had more recently guessed, they were coming in a tumbling rush of innumerable bodies. As Ssserek and Ms. Lucie had hoped, Delph, the alligator had appeared. Having escaped from the cruel cage of a roving side-show artist, he had taken abode in the swamp where he had met and been befriended by Buttons and Sally. As expected, he had laid in wait, as only an alligator can, resting comfortably on a partially sunken log, with

only his keen eyes telling of his careful vigil. He could lay for hours on end, never moving a muscle except for his eyes, which missed nothing moving overhead, beneath the water, or on top of it.

It was Delph, the gator who had given the first warning to the birds overhead. He had lurked deep in the darker regions of the swamp until the first distant chitterings of the rats had warned him of their approach. Then, having warned the birds of the oncoming danger, he had fearlessly cruised along the rats. First, the rats had moved during the night along the edges of the fen and marsh, then had taken to the small islands and tussocks of grass which provided good footing and cover. Only when they had taken to moving along the trunks of dead trees torn up by the previous season's storm could they be spotted. Here they moved swiftly, literally tumbling over one another in their hurry. Their eyes glowed red with anticipation. Their hunger was great, and with its urgency pressing them on, their anger, simmering at best at all times, now rose to greater heights. Their hunger drove them, while their anger gave them the necessary strength to surmount difficult objects that lay in their path. And behind, the voice drove them. A whiplash of hatred and spite. It drove them with barbs of words, promises of gluttony, and most of all, anticipation of hate's fulfillment.

Buttons was at the swamp's edge, waiting patiently now that the time had come. She did not turn as Sally and the young wolf ranged along side. With Ssserek's and Ms. Lucie's approach, Buttons turned and briefly nodded.

She glared at Rarebit, then relenting, spoke, "Rarebit, please go. This is no place for you. We couldn't have properly prepared if it hadn't been for your knowledge of the swamp. But, go. Please."

Of necessity, Rarebit left, recognizing the wisdom of the words. A small frog would hardly have slowed the smaller of rats. His knowledge had been given, his plans lay out before all. Ms. Lucie must assume both roles now. Rarebit had no place in battle such as was coming, and Ms. Lucie was safe in a tree where she could observe the battle from her high vantage point, while receiving messages from the many birds that flocked above.



As she settled to watch, the battle began. Dwellers of the forest, field, and woods rushed to the shore as the high-pitched cry of the rats sounded.

Ssserek, Earl, the wolf, and the two small dogs met the first rats to land. The battle surged to and fro along the shore, the two small dogs doing great damage in their initial fury. But the numbers of rats increased rapidly, many rolling off the logs into the cold, deep water to swim ashore in a widening front of glaring red eyes.

As Earl fought with the singular intensity of his kind, several more wolves appeared, including the younger wolf who had followed Buttons, diving in to rip a ferocious rat from Buttons's back. Others came; coyotes and a young lynx appeared as more rats drove upon the dogs. The rats could not match the wolves and coyotes in strength, but hordes of them kept appearing, driving ever further toward the forest, the depths of which could give them cover and the ability to attack from all directions at the same time.

Ssserek rose up and moved toward the vanguard of a new cluster of rats crossing tree limbs to sand. The rats recoiled as he struck and struck again. Bodies flew in all directions, and the serpent, wolf, and coyote made bloody forays into the rats' midst. But there were too many rats and too few four-legged fighters. Suddenly, like a bullet from the sky, Ms. Lucie appeared by Ssserek.



In a whirl of wings, Ms. Lucie circled Ssserek's head. "Keep it up. Rabbits and squirrels are sacrificing themselves to keep the rats from the forest. Small field mice are attacking a single rat in great numbers."

Ssserek turned once again to the battle. At the shore's edge, Buttons and Sally could be seen going down again and again under the weight of rats, only to rear up once again. Buttons would grab one, and with a furious shake of her head, would send it flying, the rat's neck invariably broken.

Ssserek called to the two dogs who were tiring rapidly. Hardly any larger than the largest rat, they performed feats beyond any animal several-fold their size. But they were young and their energy was waning rapidly.

Ssserek called out, "Bugle, Sally, bugle as you have never bugled before. Bugle for more help."

Ssserek's exhortation was not lost on Sally as she and Buttons recognized the need for larger and stronger allies. Up went Sally's voice, its clarion call reaching across marsh and forest. Buttons's voice rose with Sally's, the two resting against the fearsome form of Ssserek's great breast.

Their voices carried above the trees, reaching out in urgency to bear, badger, and owl, reaching out to all who had claw or fang. The need was great, as it was urgent. And they came, large and small, brave and not-so-brave, they came.

As Biff—his anger and hatred covering him like a cloak—slashed at the remaining rats on shore, Buttons had attacked one of the large rats with the full ferocity of her breed. Born to be rat killers, she had reverted to her ancestral drives and was upon him before he had time to brace himself. She moved with a slashing attack which, in its utter recklessness, almost carried the day. Small she might be, but she was fearless though she faced an animal larger and more cunning. Even as she bowled the rat over, she was on top, tearing at his shoulder. He screamed in pain and drove her back. Back and forth they went, Buttons tiring as the fatigue of the long fighting caught her once again. The large rat grinned evilly and rushed at her, only to be smashed to the sand by Biff's broad paw. He grinned lopsidedly, but moved back to the general fray.

Behind them, the deer had come in a wave of bodies. Then, it was the largest of the wild pigs, followed in turn by the smaller wild hogs. Their eyes matched the red of the rats, and the glitter of their anger was fearful to behold. Their broad noses swept mud, swamp, and rats before them, sweeping all indiscriminately into the air. What the deer missed the hogs could overwhelm with their bulk and strength and greater agility. Behind them came the peccaries and bobcats, raging to and fro, guarding the back of the deer and hog. And behind them were many wild or feral cats, feline grace and strength wreaking great havoc upon their natural enemies.

Cross-eye, tomcat and feline companion of bobcats, yowled in joy as he nearly bit through the neck of one rat while clawing the eye out of another. His low-pitched scream of pure fighting joy raised the fading spirits of all. His speed matched his ferocity, and the rats drew back in fear and wonder at his awesome attack.

It was perhaps the small size and ferocious strength of the peccaries which finally began to turn the tide. Their size was small, but their strength was great. The peccaries fought with tooth and cloven hoof, tearing and stomping, their high-pitched squeals of anger reverberating against the bordering forest. Their spirits rose even as Cross-eye, with a young bobcat at his shoulder, moved further in the now-crowded rats who were retreating into those who were moving forward.

Then, off one of the last remaining logs, King Rat appeared in front of Buttons. "So, little one," he whined, "we meet again."

Buttons's snarl rose as she smelled the evil one. He was near, and she meant to have him. She turned and was off, racing across the fallen log. A large cluster of rats turned and followed, their red eyes never leaving the small, black figure.

The rats quickly closed the distance between themselves and the small, black dog. Just as they launched themselves upon her, the figure of Biff and the lone wolf appeared. Biff slashed right and left as the wolf tore into the rats. The rats were fierce fighters, quick and intelligent in their movements.

But they stood no chance against the bulk and strength of Biff, and even less, against the cold ferocity of the wolf.

The situation was rapidly resolved in their favor. As Biff sat panting while the wolf dispatched the last of the rats, he turned back and forth, seeking Buttons. But seek where he may, he could not detect her. He turned right and left, but could not pick up her odor in the fearful mess of marsh and broken rats. The young wolf nodded without speaking a word. Both knew what must be done. They moved off more slowly now, casting back and forth along the shore as it turned and twisted to the south.

But past the shore, Buttons stared at her tormentor.

“You are brave, little sister,” he hissed at her. “But it will heed you nothing this day. You belong to me.”

Buttons’s ears laid flat back along her head. Her snarl rose as she attacked, slashing at the shoulder of her vile opponent. The rat moved like a flash, twisting to avoid her attack, and at the same time, tearing her flank as she passed.

His gleeful hiss came clearly. “Too late, little sister, my minions are even now circling to enter the forest. Once there, we will never be dislodged.”

It was Buttons’s turn to scream, shrilly for the pain was great. She turned in less than the length of her small compact body and grabbed the rat’s long ropy tail. He rose into the air, his voice tearing at her in anger and pain. He tore loose and raced for the embankment and the forest beyond.

Buttons’s four legs churned the sand as she leaped after him. As she leaped upon his back, she spoke into his ear, “Not yet, my old friend, not just yet. Remember?”

Her jaws clamped tightly about the tail and the two rolled down the embankment. The rat had never known such pain, and he heard his tail snap as she crushed it. He squealed again and again as he ripped his torn and bloodied tail from her grasp.

“You, you, fiend. Look, look at what you have done. You’ll pay for this.” He leaped at her, his lips as red with blood as his eyes were with hatred.

Buttons leaped to one side and slashed the shoulder of the rat as he passed. But the rat was able to bowl the Scottie over and turned, leaping upon her, his teeth going for her exposed neck.

Buttons kicked upward with all four feet, catching the rat squarely in the chest, sending him rolling in the sand. Both leaped to their feet, heads low and fangs bared. They circled, the rat’s tail dragging as it left a thin trail of blood on the sand. He backed away from the snarling small dog whose coat was smeared with mud and blood. Then, with a sudden leap, he lifted himself onto a tree trunk, racing away from her, deeper into the swamp.

Buttons never hesitated. Scrambling onto the tree, she followed, taking more care than the rat, whose claws could more easily grip the wet and slippery surface. Further out they went, tree to tussock of grass to tree, and finally, to a small island of grass and mud. He smiled grimly as he hunched himself for the anticipated attack which came quicker than even he had expected. The small dog wasted no time in circling. She simply launched herself straight into his face.

The snarling mass of Buttons and the rat disappeared into the swirling pool of cold, dark water. They sank rapidly into its depths, but the rat fought his way free and swiftly moved toward the surface. Irrked now, and weak from the loss of blood, he pulled himself partially onto the bank of the small island of grass. Buttons more slowly struggled to the surface. She was a poor swimmer at the best of times, and now, she, too, was weak and tired. Her fear she swallowed, not without some water. Despite her waning strength, her determination rose with her, slowly at first, and then more swiftly. Seeing King Rat crawling from the water only gave her greater resolve.

Her short legs churned the muddy water into a froth of muck, weed, and grass. She leaped upon the shore and grabbed the rat as he was about to move even deeper into the swamp. He screamed once again as her needle-

sharp teeth pierced his flesh. Buttons was not to be denied. She whirled him about and then tossed him off the embankment, slipping as she did so on the wet grass mixed with mud. He sank into the dark waters without a sound, his lips curled in a silent snarl of hatred and glaring eyes. But Buttons's footing was poor, and then she fell with a loud splash into the water once again. This time, her tired legs could barely move. She gasped for air, but sucked in water. Her lungs felt on fire. Then, as weariness overcame her, she slipped slowly and then more rapidly into the depths where glittering red eyes waited.

With great numbers and the weight of those numbers, the rats had almost overcome the four-legged fighters that had waited onshore. The rats' slashing attacks on the flanks of the advancing animals had been defeated. Still, they had come on, where water moccasins, rattle snakes, and others had waited as the second line of defense.

Then, the rats had hesitated with the bellows of Biff sounding across the swamp. Unexpectedly, their attacks began to break apart. First, large groups hesitated, then broke in different directions. Then, smaller groups began to rush back and forth, all coordination lost.

"What has happened?," Biff asked.

As Buttons and the great leader of the rats had disappeared, the rats themselves became more and more confused. The young wolf limped forward, bleeding from many cuts and slashes. He shook his head, blood spraying from a torn ear.

"Where is she? I followed but lost her when attacked." His eyes were tired, but greater still was the worry which tore at him. Ms. Lucie fluttered about above them, her calls to hawks and blackbirds, to morning doves and crows went unanswered. None knew where Buttons had gone.

The creatures of the forest and field fell back momentarily, the heart of the defense gone. But if Buttons had been lost, so too was the rat leader. Even more than the loss of Buttons, the evil presence that gave the great horde of rats their cunning and persistence was now gone. They were ripe for attack from all sides, and Ssserek lost no time in giving the order. The

Great Wolf leader, the Earl, advanced directly ahead, with younger wolves flanking his every movement. The heads of snapping turtles and water moccasins appeared in the midst of the swimming rats, doing great damage and causing great turmoil. From the air, hawks and kestrels swept down upon the rats gathering on the trunks of trees. The rats were swept into the water, where serpents, turtles, raccoons, and others waited.

Sally stood alone, drooping with fatigue and worry. She could not sense Buttons, her ears, nose, and eyes finding no evidence of her. She sagged, her left rear leg badly bitten and bleeding. Her ears bled from many bites, but to these and other wounds she paid no heed. Where was Buttons? She turned and twisted, testing the air for any indication of Buttons. But there was none. Buttons might have disappeared from the earth for all the winds could tell. Sally sat, and turning her nose to the air, emitted a low moan which began deep in her chest and slowly grew as it rose. Others began to take up the call even as they fought. Sally crumpled to the earth, bereft of hope, her breath coming in short, painful gasps.

Ssserek's head swept back and forth as he viewed the carnage taking place before him. In his many years, he had never witnessed anything like it. But he was worried. His small friends had gone. Most importantly, the impertinent Buttons had disappeared. She with her great joy in life, her zest for adventure, her inquisitive nose, and very sharp teeth. She, the small dog with all the questions. Where could she have gone? What had happened? Never before in his long life had he cared for any one creature as he had the two small dogs. He had conquered his most basic instincts and his patience had increased immeasurably as had his joy in life. He sighed, deeply.

Ms. Lucie had regained some of her usual composure, sitting above Ssserek's head, watching him with concern. Serpents such as Ssserek and his kind could be terrors at the best of times. But she had come to appreciate his wit, his insights, and his increasing love for the forest and field. She crooned softly in her throat. She was about to take flight when her thoughts were interrupted by a splashing sound.

Ssserek looked to the swamp with shock. Below, Rarebit huffed and puffed in disbelief, then he croaked in a harsh deep voice. “She comes, I believe, but many more rats also come. More help is needed.”

“She comes, she comes,” Ssserek almost pleaded.

Even as his hopes rose, the swamp seemed to have taken on a new life of its own. It moved as one, heaving and tossing as though in a storm. Then quickly, all too quickly, the moving mass resolved itself into individual rats, in as great numbers as before.

Those standing onshore shuddered. This was too much. They had fought so hard, but there were too many. This time they couldn’t win.

Ssserek moved to the water’s edge, his eyes intent upon the approaching mass directly moving toward him. He swung back to Sally. “Bugle again. We must have the hogs and peccaries. Bugle for Milo, the moose. We need their strength now more than ever. Hurry.”

Sally did as she was asked, but she couldn’t face another attack. Her voice was nearly gone as she finished, and fell rather than sitting, slumping to the ground, anger in her eyes and agony in her heart. She almost fainted, but would not. She would go down, just as Buttons had. The world seemed to whirl around her even as the first rats reached the shore. Their eyes glittered, and the first shadows of evening ominously fell across the trees.

The rats stopped, waiting for the others to catch up. Then, as their ranks filled and began to crowd the water’s edge, they moved as one. Their eyes were upon Ssserek and Sally. The two had to die first. Then the others at the shore. And then, those within the forest. No matter how many it took, they would be victorious.

The wolves attacked with the bobcats and rarely seen lynx and others filling spaces being quickly created by the crawling mass of rats. The fight could not last much longer.

Suddenly, everyone stopped. The earth began to tremble beneath their feet. Help was coming. And it did. In a great mass of huge bodies. The wild hogs had regrouped. They stormed into the mass of rats, broad shoulder to

broad shoulder, their heads lowered as before, sweeping mud and dead rats into the air.

The smaller peccaries followed. The attack was ferocious, the hogs and peccaries utterly fearless. But their numbers were too small and they began to tire also.

Then came Milo, the moose. Young and a friend of Buttons and Sally, he had quickly escaped from the grazing field of the zoo. Milo was moving swiftly as only a moose can; nothing had stood in his way or barred his path. All were swept aside. Quickly sizing up the situation, he moved into the shallow water and bore down on the masses of rats swimming to shore. They stood no chance against his great strength and his huge antlers still covered with spring's first felt. Rats, water, reeds, and weeds were thrown skyward to fall in disorganized masses of rats entangled in the mess of water vegetation. Through them he went, then back, and back again, until only masses of struggling rats were to be seen and taken at the leisure of the waiting wolves and their comrades-in-arms.

Milo moved toward shore, a dripping mass of water reeds tangling from his antlers. The glare in his eyes softened as he saw his friends. Then worry replaced his pleasure. So many were absent. He shook himself. His head rose as he bellowed his triumph and sadness.

Rarebit issued from the dense thickets that stood before the forest. "Listen, Lucie, listen to the hawks."

She turned her head and did as requested, not hearing the lack of proper address. Then, she, too, vaulted into the air, and her small figure disappeared into the distance, moving with haste toward the deep swamp.

Biff arrived in a spray of sand and bits of grass. He was smiling, his one good eye beaming proudly. He wanted to swat something, anything, but glancing at Ssserek, he quickly sat and waited for events. His grin was infectious as he poked Sally in the ribs. She groaned and slowly lifted her head, her eyes bleary with pain and sadness. What was this? This great oaf of a bear grinning at a time like this? Her foggy mind slowly regained some



degree of understanding, and she, too, slowly sat, leaning against the broad rump of the young bear. She began to grin, too.

Then Sally bugled in relief and joy, the gathering wolves and coyotes adding howls and yipping calls of joy also. Sally snapped at the tail of Biff, and then she and the bear began to race around, yipping and yelling, chasing one another's tail.

Ssserek lost his temper. Rising to his greatest height, his shout froze the young animals in their tracks.

“What’s going on? Tell me immediately, or so help me . . .”

He gasped for breath. He, Ssserek, the most incredible serpent the field had ever seen, the irascible, the all-knowing Ssserek, was at a loss for words.

Sally turned to the swamp. Something was moving toward the shore. It lay low in the water. Floating below the many birds came Delph, the gator, his bellow of greeting crossing the water to welcoming friends. Delph chortled. He guffawed, his grin rippled to and fro across his great snout. His eyes shone with brilliance, and then nearly crossed as he attempted to view his passenger.

Ssserek flopped to the ground. This was too much. Sally bugled in greeting as she spied the well-shaped head she knew so well.

Standing as tall as her short legs allowed, Buttons stood behind Delph's eyes, and her greetings to serpent, winged animals, and all the creatures rose into the air. Delph's elongated figure swept onto the beach, and lowering his head to the sand, Buttons disembarked. She turned to Delph, who slowly closed one eye. She then carefully gave him a long, slurring kiss. Delph hummed in deep contentment.

Buttons then approached Ssserek, and her nod of greeting took in both the great wolf, Ms. Lucie above them, and the serpent. A large water moccasin followed closely behind, and his nod was to Sally, whose smile now included everyone on the beach.

Delph was opening his mouth when a large broad paw descended on his head, not for the first time. His swiveled up to spy Biff comfortably ensconced on the sand.

Buttons raced to meet Sally, careful not to bump her too hard. They nosed each other, nudged one another, walked around and around for several seconds until they were satisfied that the other was still intact, if somewhat more worn and torn than expected. But they were young; they would heal fast. And besides, it was time to go to Ssserek and Ms. Lucie who waited, their patience wearing a bit thin, though they were pleased at the actions of the two.

Buttons ran to Ssserek, the magnificent, who was slowly recuperating. He took it all in, and in his turn, turned an eye to Ms. Lucie, who smiled and shook her head as though to say, "Well, here we go again."

Buttons skidded to a stop in front of Ssserek who was rising to his usual imposing stance, his head erect and gazing directly over the crowd that was gathering on the beach.

"Gee, Ssserek, are you OK?" Buttons blurted out, and her worried appearance clearly demonstrated her concern.

Ssserek looked at her, aghast. He OK? He, the great Ssserek, worried, concerned? What did she think he was?

Then, he stopped and pondered the situation. The rats were in full retreat, the shell-clad denizens of the deep swamp and the hawks hurrying the rats on their unwelcome way. There had been a great loss of life and unexpected heroism from the most unlikely sources. Many had run, losing their heads completely; it had not been a pretty sight, but certainly it was not unexpected. Courage had been the standard for the day, and that was what had to be emphasized. Still, there were issues that had to be addressed, not the least being the activities of this small dog.

For his part, Rarebit sat quietly, slowly shaking his head. It was all too much. The disastrous attack of the rats, then the sudden loss of the small Scottish terrier was almost more than he could bear. Now, with her

reappearance, even Ssserek was at a loss for words. Rarebit looked to Ssserek as the Earl quietly sat down behind Sally.

Ms. Lucie was proud of the animals sitting below her. She was thoroughly proud of the winged creatures, for their part had been essential, and much bravery and courage had been shown. She, too, looked at Ssserek, who had remained silent much longer than she would have anticipated. She turned to him also.

His voice was soft; still, it carried to all participants. His gaze was primarily for the two dogs. Sally was thoroughly fatigued, though she tried not to show it. Buttons was hurt. She limped, and her normally glossy coat was in tatters. She had fought fiercely, moreso for her size than possibly anyone there with the exception of Biff, the bear.

“First, what happened? Your unexpected loss nearly turned the table against the field and forest.”

His gaze was soft and turned fully on Buttons, who sat before him totally fatigued. He could guess, but there was little need for her head drooped again and again, each time she caught herself before falling completely down.

She looked at Ssserek, and turning saw her many friends waiting expectantly. She stood and spoke clearly, though occasionally a word was blurred with fatigue.

“I smelled him. Their leader. And I apologize, Ssserek. You told me not to go off by myself as I did, but I lost my temper. I knew where he was, coming from a different direction than we thought. He was not with the main body of rats which you fought here. He told me as he laughed at me. They were coming to encircle us, to get into the woods where they could establish themselves. I followed him, as you know. I could hear Biff’s bellowing behind me. I wasn’t needed here.”

Her head sagged, and she shivered as she recalled the sequence of events. Sally moved beside her, holding her up by leaning against her.

Buttons went on. “I followed him onto the tree trunks, and across the small bits of water to the grassy island. There we fought. I needed help, but Biff couldn’t come because there were so many against him. So I just went for him. He finally went into the water, and I slipped as I followed. He dove under the water, and I couldn’t see him. And then, he had me by the foot and began to drag me down.”

She stopped, and moved toward the shore where Biff waited. A water moccasin was curled to one side. Pausing before Biff, she lowered her head, and then she carefully licked one curving claw.

His eyes were large and dark as she said, “You were very brave, and I’m sorry I worried about you so I went too far out. I . . . I couldn’t help it. I had to.”

Biff snuffled, and then grinned his infectious best. His parents nodded briefly as they sat in the shadows of the great moss-covered trees. They were proud, of course, but other bears had participated and done marvelously well. But like their great friends to the north, they loved their solitude too well to be burdened with honors. Contentment covered them as the congregation began to break up.

“You were the brave one. I just had a good time pounding the water into froth and a few rats with it.”

His good nature could not have allowed him any criticism of the brave act he had witnessed, and he could only make light of his incredible feats. Biff chuckled, and shaking his head sent, water spraying in all directions. Nudging Delph with one large paw almost turned the alligator topsy-turvy, and then Delph had to laugh also.

Buttons stood nose-to-nose with Delph, the gator. His eyes almost crossed in his attempt to watch the small dog. Turning to Ssserek and Ms. Lucie, she continued her story.

“As I felt myself go under, suddenly the rat let go of my foot. Then, suddenly I was pushed to the top, almost sailing into the air as I sprawled on top of Delph. He had found me. As you know, he has a knack for finding

rats, and . . .” She stopped to smile at the gator who lay beaming in the warmth of the praise.

“And a taste for them, as you know.” Delph gently belched, glancing in apology at Ssserek, whose expression never changed, though he would have liked to grin, himself.

“The rest, you know. Delph brought me here, knowing how upset you all were. I do apologize to you all.” She sighed as she sat abruptly, fatigue and battle wounds overcoming her remaining strength.

The Earl and his clan of wolves who had fought so hard came then to say their goodbyes. Others followed, both large and small creatures of the forest and field. The raccoons and otters, among her best friends, remained a bit longer, but then they, too, had to leave. Many were the birds who fluttered above her, whistling their praise and thanks. Then, they, too, were gone. The deer and the peccaries, large and small hogs, cats and bobcats, they too followed in their profuse thanks and praise. Milo munched placidly at the torn weeds, ignoring the rats floating about. Then, he, too, said his goodbyes and departed for the quiet and comfort of the grazing field. Many were the praises heaped on him as he moved past the other creatures. He smiled to himself. Only for Buttons. Her small tongue on his thick lower lip was all the thanks he required.

Then, at last, the beach was silent, only Ms. Lucie and Ssserek watching as the two dogs made their way to a comfortable tussock of dry grass. There, they would tend to their wounds and speak briefly of the day.

The large figure of Biff was only a dark blur against the forest, his vigil underway. Off-shore, the cigar-shaped figure of Delph could be seen cruising up and down slowly. No one would approach the beach from that direction.

Buttons groaned as she curled up against the warm body of Sally. “No more nightmares, Sally,” she murmured as the yellow moon rose over the Great Forest and Field.

The End

# Mommy Kitty

Where she had come from, no one ever knew. None asked, and she talked very little about her background. One day, she had suddenly appeared, staying first at one home and then another. She took from one food bowl and then another. Most of the creatures, all pets of men, didn't care. They had more than enough. One small nondescript tabby cat made no difference to them. Occasionally, one of the dogs could be heard barking as they chased her away, but she would be back. When they weren't looking, of course.

But it was different with Buttons. She made it very clear that an interloper would not be tolerated. Buttons was even smaller than the cat, and possibly younger. The small Scottie still had her baby teeth, but she never hesitated to use them as everyone knew. Particularly Sally, whom Buttons had just met. They had become very close friends very quickly and fought long and furious battles, only now and then actually nipping one another. Their teeth were very sharp, as puppies' teeth are. So care was the word of the day. Have fun. Lots of it. Rough and tumble, but no hurting.

Buttons did not include the cat among her friends. In a short time, everyone else would call her Mommy Kitty, for obvious reasons. She was always pregnant. Buttons didn't care about the situation at all. Something was wrong, but she couldn't tell what it was. Maybe just a dog-versus-cat kind—of thing. She didn't know, and was always too busy to figure it out. Nonetheless, the black Scottie clearly remembered the first day. Too many birds and then the cat.

Crispin Chatterbox inquisitively cocked his head to one side for about the tenth time in the last thirty seconds, thinking to himself, "Well, here we go again."

Crispin was like all grackles—nosy, noisy, and generally disliked. He was of less-than-normal size and always on the move. He impatiently

hopped from one foot to the other, fretfully waiting for the action below to come to some fruition.

The object of his dancing stare lay roughly five and one half feet below him. A remarkable object it was, perched as it was on the rounded rear end of a small black dog furiously digging in the soft, red dirt of a beautifully organized garden.

Like a black, twisted worm, it bounced to and fro, carving crazy pirouettes in the air as dirt flew from between the dog's hind legs. Small woofing noises were emitted at regular intervals, puffing out in jets of dirt which hung in the air about the rapidly enlarging hole.

A haughty crackling comment at Crispin's side abruptly interrupted the grackle's watchfulness and almost caused him to almost stop his dance in midair.

"I see that Button Benttail is at it again. Really, I don't see what is so interesting about the silly activities of a mud-covered ground mutt. After all, it's only bound to get her into more trouble."

Crispin had immediately jerked around to face his unwelcome guest, who was, as expected, none other than that miserable, but very large, J. Wellington Blackbird. JW (as he insisted on being addressed) was of southern descent, born on a large plantation situated on a tributary of the mighty Mississippi River, and ready, willing and able, as they say, to enlarge on any topic whether his input was requested or not. Blackie (as most birds called him behind his back) lifted his left wing and preened himself, stylishly lifting one foot as he did so. Given to unwelcome snide comments about almost everything he surveyed, Blackie raised one eyebrow and looked down his nose at Crispin.

"Well, my little friend," and he curled his bill just the slightest, "what you see in *the* Benttail, I'll never know."

Crispin's small voice cracked as he angrily rose to his friend's defense. Quite literally because it was necessary for Crispin to fan his wings and repeatedly hop into the air to be at eyelevel with Blackie.



“You don’t understand. What Buttons is doing is very important.”

Of course, Crispin had no idea what Buttons was doing, or why, or for what purpose. But being a true friend, it made no difference. All that was important was that if Button wanted to do it, then it was fine with Crispin. No friend to the nasty Blackie, Crispin would have come to Buttons’s defense no matter what.

Blackie bent down, twisting his head to fix Crispin with one lofty and elevated eyebrow above a startlingly black eye.

“Well,” he snorted.

Crispin fanned his wings even more rapidly. How he hated that arrogant snort.

“Well,” came the snort again. “Just what *is* she doing?”

Blackie raised one claw and carefully scratched his beak, only partially hiding his smile which twisted and curled his lip. This, Blackie knew, would agitate Crispin even more.

The deliberate and silent gibe went home, as Blackie had anticipated. Crispin hopped backwards on the fence, momentarily seeking an avenue of escape, then straightened. He wouldn’t give Blackie the satisfaction of flying away. And, he certainly wouldn’t leave his friend who maintained her vigorous assault on the dirt.

“She . . . she was going to . . .” He didn’t finish his explanation for another voice broke in.

“Hey, Cris.” It was the furry voice of Bonnie Cottontail coming from beneath a small and heavily laden rose bush. “How long is she going to take?”

There was hardly a pause, and another voice added, “And who’s that gosh-awful big, black bird?”

Blackie preened himself once again, and ever so slightly bent downward to gaze upon the small rabbits who sat lazily, scratching themselves in the

early morning sun. He smiled to himself, the warmth of their awe slowly spreading through his body.

“Hurumph, well-spoken for small bunnies,” he thought to himself.

Another voice broke in. High-pitched and squeaky, it was whispered in a thunderous undertone to the small bunnies gathered about him. “Nuts, he ain’t all that big, less’n you take in the big words, the big voice, and the big opinion he has of himself. I’ve seen grackles almost that size.”

Now, it was JW’s turn to hop and fume in midair. Glaring at the rat-tailed squirrel, he fumed, “Don’t you think it’s a bit early for the runtiest runt of squirrels to be out of his bed, my tiniest friend, Ignatius?”

“Well, you know more about beds than most of us, seeing as how you rob ’em often enough.” Iggy, as he preferred to be called, was always ready for a good fight, so long as it didn’t come to any rough stuff. After all, he really wasn’t built for it, being rather stringy and small.

JW was about to launch another verbal thrust when he was interrupted. Several things happened at the same time. Crispin took quickly to the air, the bunny rabbits turned tail and disappeared, as did Iggy who headed for the nearest tree, and JW, turning, was face to face with a long, lean cat whose tail was slowly whipping back and forth. The cat lay crouched scant inches from JW.

The large blackbird knew he had been negligent, but still he squawked, “Drat, you, Crispin, it’s your fault. Your fault, you know.” JW knew very well it was his own fault. No bird allowed any cat within several feet, for as fast as he could take to the air, the cat would be upon him before he could reach safety. JW began to inch backwards, but came up against the corner fence post which served only to further hinder any possible escape. The cat smoothly followed, licking its thin lips.

JW was large, but the cat was within a foot now, and was quite obviously enjoying itself. Mealtime was at hand, and this particular morsel would go down with even greater satisfaction than most. JW’s snide comments had often been directed at the cat and now was payoff time.

The cat's belly touched the top rail of the fence in anticipation of its lethal leap, when Buttons burst from her hole on the outside of the fence. She had been watching the action as she made the hole just big enough for her to escape the fenced yard. As she rose from the hole, she barked furiously, leaping up against the fence, her stout, but small, body causing the fence to sway ever so slightly.



The sound of her voice and the reverberations of the fence had hardly reached JW and the cat when JW launched himself into the air. The sudden interruption broke the cat's concentration only for a tiny fraction of a second, but it had made the difference. The large blackbird was several feet from the fence and was ascending rapidly when the cat made a futile leap, clutching at the bird and grabbing a few large and long black tail feathers. The cat landed heavily in the dust of the Great Field just in front of the small dog.

Buttons did what dogs have done for eons; she attacked, barking even more furiously than before, racing toward the cat whose back immediately arched, hair on end. Spitting furiously, the cat easily evaded the small dog's rush, and with a quick leap over the dog, reached the base of the fence. With one swift movement, she leaped to the top where she sat, gazing down with anger and frustration.

Buttons stopped her commotion as JW circled above her. Although still haughty, his voice was clearly chagrined at his narrow escape. He curtly thanked the small dog, while at the same time blaming her and Iggy for his narrow escape, and then headed for the tall maples some distance from the fence and the immediate environs of cat and dog.

Buttons sat at the bottom of the fence, contemplating the cat. She had never really met one before, and this one had angered her. The cat hissed as Buttons moved back and forth. "You had no right to interfere." The cat's voice was soft and quiet, but the words were angry and tightly controlled.

Buttons looked upward, somewhat startled by the cat's comment. Sitting, she asked, "And why not? You would have eaten poor old JW if I hadn't."

As the cat answered, Buttons cocked her head to one side. This cat was a female, just like her, and was a typical tabby cat, black and brown stripes mingling with patches of brown.

The hissing voice of the cat came once again. "You will leave me and mine alone. Do you understand, little dog? Or else!"

"Or else what, cat?" queried Buttons. "This is not your yard and just who do you belong to? I've never seen you before."

"It's none of your business, dog. Go, and leave me alone." The cat sat and began washing a forepaw, her tail still lashing back and forth in poorly disguised anger.

Buttons snorted. "First, cat," and here she emphasized the last word, "you have no business here. Secondly, I'm not afraid of you, and you will stay out of my yard. Thirdly, you will leave my friends alone. Go elsewhere, if you must hunt, but get out of my sight."

Buttons was beginning to get angry as young pups will. She began to hop up and down on her short, stout legs, growling deeply in her throat, daring the cat to do something. Which is precisely what the cat did, as cats will.

She leaped to the ground, landing just behind Buttons, who spun on her tail. But it was too late, and Buttons was too slow, which she learned to her woe. The feline raked her claws across Buttons's round rump, and then as Buttons whirled again, whipped her claws across a very sensitive nose.

Buttons howled in pain as the cat spat, yowling in return as her anger at the dog rose. Buttons was also becoming more and more enraged and attacked fiercely, but to little avail. She was getting badly mauled when respite arrived in the figure of her closest friend, Sally.

Sally sailed into the fight with sheer joy, bugling as she did so. The cat, who was no taller than Buttons, but longer, was really not all that big. In fact, the cat was downright thin, her sides sunken in, with little evidence of fat anywhere. The cat had no chance against the two fierce little fighters. For, although they were young, they had no intention of giving in. All three rolled in the dirt, giving as good as they got. Finally, seeing her opportunity, the cat broke free and with one leap made it to the top of the fence. She stood there for a moment, glaring at the two dogs, as she was now puffing from the exertion. Then, with a graceful twist, the cat disappeared from sight, leaving the two dogs wondering how she could do it.

Both Sally and Buttons sat abruptly, taking measure of their many scratches. Buttons in particular had taken a real beating and she glared at Sally, daring her to say something. Sally did, of course, but not what Buttons had anticipated.

Instead of some dumb comment about the many scratch marks Buttons's nose bore, Sally said in a speculative voice, "Boy, did she disappear fast. I wonder where she lives. It must be close by, though I don't remember meeting her before."

Buttons muttered as much to herself as to Sally, "You know, I think maybe you're right. She didn't really want to leave, but . . ." Here, Buttons grinned hugely, "We didn't give her much choice, did we? Sure showed her. And, if I find her, I'm really going to give it to her. And I will find her, watch and see."

Sally looked long at her friend. She knew Buttons, and she knew Buttons would not give up until she had evened the score. But, for some reason, it didn't seem right. Sally was as young as Buttons was, and being a beagle, liked to hunt. But this did not set right. She didn't say so though because she had received her share of scratches also.

They spent the remainder of the morning chasing Iggy from tree to tree, a game he enjoyed immensely, causing a great deal of racket, disturbing the larger squirrels, and, of course, setting the many birds into flight time and again. Finally, they tired and rested within the shade of one of the larger

elms, before finally calling the day quits and returning to their respective homes, all agreeing beforehand to meet the next day.

For the next several days, Buttons was clearly preoccupied and did not participate in their games with the same unrestrained enthusiasm. As the days passed by, Buttons played less and less until she simply was not to be found at all.

Buttons was indeed almost invisible. She lay beneath small bushes, or deep within the tall reeds which surrounded a small garden pond, only the tips of black ears being visible. Always vigilant, her small brown eyes missed nothing that moved. She simply waited, hour after hour after hour. Sooner or later her adversary would appear, and, then, only then, would the terrier act.

The target of her watchfulness would appear occasionally at sunset or sunrise. Rarely during the day. At night, Buttons would be inside her boy's home, thus preventing watching round-the-clock. It simply aggravated the situation because Buttons would go to bed resentfully, sleep restlessly next to her boy, and rise angrily, rushing to the door to be let out as soon as possible.

But she came. Mommy Kitty would make her appearance sooner or later. Then, Buttons attacked, barking furiously as she raced to overtake the cat. Each time, the cat rapidly disappeared over the fence. But sooner or later, she would reappear and once again be attacked by the small terrier.

The cat appeared reluctant to stand and fight. She would stand briefly, glaring at Buttons, but would then launch herself over the fence.

After that event, the cat was to be seen crossing the Great Field at different times of the day. She was usually in the company of a tomcat, much to the glee of many creatures. As one large squirrel put it, "Humpphh! More often pregnant than not." Then the squirrel would turn and begin to berate her many offsprings and the male who sat at her side.

Day after day, the same scene would be played out. Buttons angrily attacking and Mommy Kitty backing away, her sides heaving with her inner

anger and increasing frustration.

Buttons would grin wickedly after each encounter. Mommy Kitty was wearing down. It could be seen in her thin sides, the drooping belly, and the fear growing in the cat's eyes. She'd be sorry for attacking Buttons and Sally that long-ago day. Yes, Buttons's persistence was paying off.

She told her best friends, Sally and Iggy, nothing. Knowing the cat's habits, the small terrier could go back to her play during the day, becoming increasingly vigilant as night approached.

Iggy finally broached the issue because his curiosity was as long as his patience was short.

Sally silently agreed with him when he said, "Hey, Buttons, what's going on? You've been up to something, haven't you? I can tell."

Sally joined in to urge Buttons to tell them. Buttons heaved a deep breath, looked closely at her two best friends, and then broke down and told them.

"Look," she said, "that cat that we jumped the other day? Well, I think I know where she lives. And," here she looked meaningfully at them, "it's not in one of the homes."

"Oh, nuts," said Iggy in disgust. "All she is, is some old stray that will wreak havoc around here for a while and then leave as they always do. What's so great about that?"

Buttons shook her head vehemently. "No, you don't have the picture. She's got a hole under the old part of the fence with our neighbor. You know, the old couple that we rarely see outside."

Sally was watching Buttons with great interest. Clearly, she had a plan of action in mind, and it undoubtedly meant trouble for someone. Probably all of them. "Just what do you have in mind, Buttons?"

Buttons puffed up her small, narrow chest. "I'm going to wait until I see her leave, and then I'm going to dig her hole into nothing. She'll have to leave, whether she likes it or not. So, there. What do you think of that?"



There was a wicked look of determination in her eyes, and neither Iggy nor Sally said anything. They simply followed behind as Buttons turned and headed for the area in question. Sally was concerned, nonetheless. This was not typical of Buttons, who never held a grudge. She was one to forgive and forget. She had never harmed anyone. But this was different. Her anger had taken on a life of its own. Sally didn't like it, but as a good friend will in such situations, she vowed to stay with Buttons. Maybe Sally could help. How, she didn't know; but she would try, come what may.

The three entered the garden quietly, and then lay hidden in the shade of a very large bush, which hid them from anyone in the garden. Twice a bird landed just in front of them to seek worms without being aware of the three. Finally, Iggy nudged Sally, and indicated with a twitch of his nose the direction of some movement in the thick of flowering plants. Thick ivy covered the ground between plants. The three of them watched with great anticipation as the cat emerged from the thickest area of ivy, which partially climbed the rotting fence. Looking around and seeing nothing, a lithe and sinuous leap took the cat to the top of the fence and then over.

The yard of the old couple next door sloped from front to back such that the old fence sat at least two feet above Buttons's yard. Thus, the small, black terrier could hide to her heart's content. She actually had a large hole in the side hill where the ground rose most steeply.

Buttons stopped in midstride as she rose. Sally was rising also, and bumped into her friend. "Heh, what gives?"

Buttons dropped her head in shame as she recalled the appearance of garden earlier in the spring. She turned and looked at Sally. "What a ninny I've been. I dug a good-sized hole in the side of that bank and then promptly forgot it. It's covered by the ivy hanging down the fence. What a ninny I've been."

Sally just grinned, making Buttons even more frustrated.

With the cat's disappearance, Buttons burst from the bush, rushing toward the spot just vacated by the cat. It took only moments for the keen noses of Sally and Buttons to locate the entrance to the cat's den. It was

carefully hidden by the ivy, as the two anticipated, and lay at the foot of the old post. A partially rotten slat covered the top.

Buttons nosed about for a moment, a questioning look coming into her face. Then, she turned to the task at hand, forgetting the disquieting thought that had crossed her mind. She went fiercely to work, her broad forepaws gouging the soft dirt up and flinging it between her legs causing Iggy, who had arrived even as the two dogs raced across the yard, and Sally to move to the side to avoid being hit by the flying dirt and twigs. Buttons worked with the furious single-mindedness of her breed, never stopping for a moment before she had enlarged the opening sufficiently to allow her entrance to the pocket that lay beneath the fence.

Grass, twigs, and bits of ivy covered the floor of the makeshift den. Overhead, it was protected by an old slab of concrete that had, at one time, been meant to support the fence post. Now, only roots of bushes gave the wall some strength. It was well-situated to protect the occupants from the infrequent, but heavy, rains that came at that time of the year. Both Iggy and Sally pushed into the den, and as had Buttons, stopped in amazement. Their voices were hushed as they looked at one another.

“Wow, we sure did it this time,” muttered Iggy.

“Yeh,” agreed Sally. “But, how are we going to set this mess right?”

Buttons retreated and sat in front of the enlarged den’s opening. Her nose was caked with dirt and bits of grass and dirt clung to her bushy eyebrows. She slumped to the ground as she listened to her two friends’ wondering voices.

“Hey,” said Iggy, “they’re kind of cute. Look, Sally, their eyes are just beginning to open. How many do you count?”

Sally was in fact busy sorting out the litter of kittens, for that was what they had uncovered. Four small bundles of fur huddled together in one corner. To the far left, the shriveled bodies of two more were moldering, death having taken them several days before. One of the kittens tried to gain its feet, but could not, and the four just lay there looking with fear and

wonder at the creatures which occupied the entrance to their safe home. Safe, until now.

Sally chuckled and moved toward the small kittens to examine them closer when she was suddenly thrust aside. The cat had returned unexpectedly, and now leaned backwards on her haunches in a defensive posture, a round ball of angry, erect hair. She was furious and small hissing spats were emitted regularly as she faced the beagle and squirrel before her. Neither of them moved, instinctively knowing the cat would fight to the death for her offspring, even if no harm was intended. Which it wasn't. But neither Sally nor Iggy had the slightest idea of how to break the impasse. Frankly, they were afraid to move backwards for that might precipitate the attack as quickly as a movement forward. They would not fight the cat under these circumstances, but could not run.

A muffled voice came from behind them, "Please, let me in. It's all my fault. Let me in. Please." Buttons's pleading voice finally broke the frozen figures of the creatures facing one another in the den.

Sally looked at the cat who did not move. Sally and Iggy then slowly dipped their heads, and even more slowly edged backwards. To their relief, the feline maintained her defensive stand and watched them go. Buttons replaced them and lay down, resting her nose on the ground just in front of the cat. Neither said anything for several moments.

In the most contrite voice she could manage, Buttons addressed the cat, "Please, ma'am, it's all my fault. I did it. I didn't know you had babies in here."

The small feline female relaxed ever so slightly. Her glittering eyes bespoke her anger and concern. Fear lay there also for the many possibilities this intrusion could mean had already crossed her mind. Clearly, some of them were beginning to dawn on the small Scottish Terrier before her. She turned and gazed with longing at the two still figures in the corner.

Turning to Buttons, she hissed, "If you hadn't prevented my hunting they might still be here. But, I can't get enough food. I've known of your

watching and seeking. And, now, you see what you have done.”

She curled herself around the four squirming figures of the newborn kittens and began to lick each of them in turn. “They’re all I have now.” Her accusing gaze never left the eyes of Buttons. “What am I to do now? I can’t defend that huge opening you’ve just made and find food so that I can nurse them.”

Buttons started to apologize, but the cat furiously hissed, “No, it’s too late. You’ve done too much harm. This is not the first litter I’ve lost.”

Mommy Kitty coughed, a retching, hacking cough that came from deep in her chest. “It’s too late. Don’t you understand?”

Her eyes glittered with suppressed grief and anger. “This will be the last. No more.”

She coughed once again, sinking down to nose each of the four remaining. Only the largest stood a chance of survival. The bright light brought no relief, only more grief. Her strength had been sapped by Buttons’s unrelenting harassment. But clearly, the three young creatures before her could not know. Only in time. Maybe not then.

Iggy and Sally pushed in beside Buttons, who lay quietly contemplating the scene before her. Iggy was as precocious as usual and just as unconcerned about the effect of his words as usual.

“Heck, Sally and Buttons can protect them, and I’ll watch from the tree overhead. You needn’t worry.”

Both dogs woofed in surprise, totally caught off-balance by the full meaning and content of Iggy’s words.

“Well,” said Sally.

“Gee,” responded Buttons.

“You’ll what?” glared the cat.

“Well, why not,” said Sally. “We got you into this mess. We can help to get you out of it.”

“No,” said Buttons. She began to back out, and looking at the cat who had partially risen, her back beginning to arch, said, “We’ll be right back. I’ve a better solution.” Buttons giggled, “You’ll see.”

The three sat outside for several minutes. The words of their discussion came muffled to the cat, who lay unmoving as her kittens nursed. The content of the discussion could not be made out, but their voices rose on occasion and then would sink. The cat began to worry that the dogs—in particular, the small black one—meant more mischief towards her and her litter. But then, Sally’s nose appeared, with Iggy’s right beside her.

“Buttons has gone to check, but we think we can solve everything,” Sally quickly said as she saw the concern on the cat’s face.

“Ya,” said Iggy, “don’t worry. Buttons can fix anything when she sets her mind to it.”

The feline was too kind to reply. Actually, she was too preoccupied with one of the kittens who had just decided he would examine the two new creatures before him, and was stumbling and lurching across the floor of the den towards them. Sally leaned forward and licked the small creatures’ face, and Iggy could only coo as they watched the odd progress of the kitten.

The small kitten was just beginning to climb Iggy’s leg when Buttons reappeared, pleasure clearly written on her features.

“Come on,” she said, “I know where to put them where they’re safe, and you . . .” She turned to the mother cat and said, “I don’t know your name.”

The cat looked enquiring, and answered with hesitancy, “All creatures hereabout simply call me Mommy Kitty.”

Iggy broke in with “Mommy Kitty. I like that. Well, Mommy Kitty, what shall we do?”

Iggy looked at Buttons and then back to Mommy Kitty, whose mind was whirling with all of the action going on about her. She was young for all the pregnancies she had experienced. She was not accustomed to three such

creatures as these facing her. As her strength failed slowly, she would let matters take their course. These three would know in time.

She started to say, “Well, I don’t . . .” when Buttons reached for the kitten at Iggy’s leg. She opened her mouth and was about to try and pick the kitten up when she was stopped short by the hissing spit of Mommy Kitty whose back was arched as she sidled toward the black dog.

“Just what do you think you’re doing?” Her claws were fully displayed as she approached Iggy and Buttons.

Buttons heaved a sigh. Females could be such a problem, she thought. She hurried to answer before Mommy Kitty decided to take matters into her own hands, well, claws, that is.

“Look, I’ve got just the place for you. It’s right next door. The older couple.” She looked to Sally and Iggy for support.

Sally caught on quickly as usual, and Iggy sat to scratch his head in perplexity. Then, he, too smiled, and jumped up, upsetting the kitten, whose mewling became urgent as it flopped on its back. Mommy Kitty moved swiftly to pick up the kitten deftly in her mouth and carefully deposit it with the other three. Then, she turned back to the two dogs and the squirrel, all of whom appeared to be smiling.

“OK,” she said, “just what do you have in mind?”

Sally answered for all of them. “It’s the old couple next door. They have a box on their back porch, under cover, and it’s always fixed up, just like when before their cat died. Right?”

She turned to Buttons for agreement, and it was Iggy who answered. “Yeah, boy, did they ever spoil that cat. Too fat to even chase me.”

Buttons looked directly at Mommy Kitty. “Look,” she said, “it’s just perfect for you. Put your kittens there and they’ll always be taken care of. Just you wait and see.”

Mommy Kitty was not about to take such a drastic move, without due consideration, but the three were persuasive, and she was hungry. Without

food, she could not continue to nurse the four who were always whimpering in their sleep for more, or nudging her for more milk when she didn't have any. She really had no choice, and finally went along with them.

It was some move. Each insisted on carrying one of the kittens. Iggy could pick one up in his arms because of his clever paws shaped like hands as they were, but then he didn't know what to do after that, sort of sitting there with a dumb look of pleasure on his face. Sally had a soft mouth and gently picked one up behind the ears just as she was supposed to. She disappeared, making Mommy Kitty very uncomfortable. As she watched Buttons's attempt, she almost had to laugh because the Scottie would open her mouth as far as she could to pick up one of the kittens, but her long fangs prevented her from gripping the kitten carefully. In the end, it was Sally and Mommy Kitty who accomplished the move with the moral support of the other two.

Iggy, Sally, and Buttons carefully watched from cover as Mommy Kitty and her kittens were discovered by the old inhabitants of the house. The reception was as warm as the three could have hoped for, and Iggy and Sally were congratulating one another when they noticed that Buttons was absent. Sally looked at Iggy, shook her head in a worried fashion, and then left, tracking her friend quite easily, although she had an idea where to look.

As she had anticipated, Sally found Buttons digging away at Mommy Kitty's old den. With a muffled woof, Buttons backed out as the hole collapsed. Sally watched her friend sit in front of the old den for a second, her only comment being "Buried your guilt, eh?"

Buttons walked past her best friend, her voice muffled as she moved away.

"I don't know. Something was wrong back there. I don't like it."

Buttons visibly shuddered as the three moved into the Great Field. Sally dropped her head but said nothing. Iggy bounced on ahead, totally oblivious to the two dogs' actions. He would simply await as events occurred, doing his best to help, but he was usually in the way.

As the days, passed Mommy Kitty was to be seen once again in the field. On such occasions, there would be no male accompanying her. She moved slowly, her normal lithe actions gone. With her head down, she seldom paid much attention to the other creatures. Even the small ones paid no attention to her actions. She no longer posed a threat to them.

Then she was no longer to be seen at all.

Buttons was sunning herself, squirming slowly in the dust of the afternoon. The sun would be down before long, and then the nice heat of the ground would rapidly dissipate. She looked up as Sally slowly approached. Iggy followed behind, his eyes large and questioning.

Buttons rapidly rose and shook the dust off. Something was wrong, very wrong. Saying nothing, she simply waited for Sally to speak.

Sally took a deep breath, her eyes sad. She sighed once again, glancing once in the direction of Iggy who could only droop.

“She wants you. Now. You better hurry.”

“Wa . . . wa . . . Who wants me?” Buttons was increasingly confused by the brief words and the behavior of her best friend.

“Mommy Kitty, of course. She’s at her old den. Better hurry. Iggy and I’ll stay here.”

Buttons gulped and would have asked for more information, but Sally only shook her head and pointed to the fence.

It was but a few seconds for Buttons to scramble under the fence and make her way to the old fence which leaned to one side. Mommy Kitty was there, holding herself upright by leaning in turn against the post.

The cat was gaunt, her muzzle now grey, patches of hair missing. Her eyes were large in her narrow features, but they missed nothing as Buttons slowly approached.

Buttons gulped once again, her throat tight. Her words sounded small and distant in the depths of the garden. “What is it, Mommy Kitty? You sent for me?”



Mommy Kitty's gaze never left the eyes of Buttons as she replied softly. "Yes. I need you to do me a favor."

She coughed, a small dot of frothy fluid appearing at the corner of her mouth.

She nodded toward the embankment behind her. "I can't do it by myself."

Her voice dropped as she fought the cough trying to escape. She fought the constricting band around her chest, trying her best to catch enough air to speak once again. Her sides heaved several times before her gaze returned to Buttons, who was staring in wonder at the ground behind Mommy Kitty.

"You have to do it. You must. Dig."

Mommy Kitty slumped to the ground, all of her strength now needed to maintain her attention on the small black dog who had stepped back.

Buttons took a step backwards. "I can't," she said. "I can't."

"You must." Mommy Kitty spoke harshly though her voice was low. "Only you can do it."

Buttons would have turned and run, but she couldn't move. She couldn't evade the eyes of Mommy Kitty. She could not say no. She could only blink, remembering the day she first had dug in that embankment.

Then, taking a deep breath, she did what she had to do. Her sides ached. Her back hurt. She had a hard time even seeing the ground before her. But she dug. Dug as only she could.

Soon, a large hole in the side of the embankment loomed before the two. It was deep as it narrowed. When she was finished, she backed out and waited for Mommy Kitty to speak.

"You will return after dark. You know what to do. You've done it before."

A racking cough shook Mommy Kitty, and blood appeared in the spittle on her thin lips.

Buttons couldn't help it. Before she could stop herself, she spoke "But the kittens. What about them?"

Mommy Kitty's eyes glittered in the growing darkness as she gasped and then whispered, "Dead. I buried them in the field where you will never find them. Dead." She swallowed convulsively. "All dead."

She slowly moved toward the hole, and standing there, looked down on the small black dog. "You will go now. Return in one hour." With that, Mommy Kitty disappeared into the blackness of the hole. Mommy Kitty looked back briefly, only eyes visible, and then they, too, closed.



Buttons did as she was ordered by the cat, saying nothing, but looking back time after time. She hurt. Down deep. And, she knew the hurt would be there a very long time. There was no time for regrets. Being what she was, she accepted it. Never again would she be quite the same. Buttons was Buttons. She straightened her back and moved back to the field.

Buttons sat outside the fence. Iggy and Sally lay nearby, but neither approached her. Buttons finally stood and slowly approached the fence. She disappeared rapidly, moving toward the hole which was black against even the night.

She hesitated. How desperately she wanted to run. Run forever. Run and run and run. Run until she could remember nothing. But she couldn't. She wouldn't. Her head dipped once, but resolutely she moved to the side of the hole and quickly dug one more time.

There was no sound as the hole collapsed, the dirt silently sliding down toward the green of the garden's ivy. A few bits of dirt stopped rolling against Buttons's forepaws, but she didn't see them as she turned away.

Followed by Iggy, Buttons made her way into the field. There, she made her way to a small mound where she sat in silence for several seconds. Sally was nowhere to be seen as Buttons raised her nose to the darkening sky.

A Scottie dog's howl began low in their throat and emerged as a wavering low moan. It was not a loud sound, but carried well, the sadness and unhappiness tightly bound within it all too apparent.

Buttons's lament was broken as Sally joined her friend. Then, the two sang their sad song for several minutes, their voices rising and then finally sinking into silence.

Buttons took a deep sigh as Sally said, "I'm sorry." She was about to go on when the voice of Ssserek rose at their side, startling the two dogs who had been entirely unaware of his approach.

"Your comment was appropriate, as was your action." He addressed each in turn. "It is never easy to be the unwitting cause of grief or death, but it is part of our world. My kind has lived with it for what seems an eternity, and if my throat could manage such sounds, I, too, would sing as you do. And now that you have sung your grief, let it also be your farewell. Put it behind you." He swung his head at them, and if they had not moved quickly, they would have been sent tumbling in the dirt.

In a very soft voice, Buttons said, "Thank you, Great Ssserek. Thank you and . . ."

Buttons would have gone on, but Ssserek was looking intently at Sally, who squirmed beneath his unwinking gaze.

"Well, my little one?" He waited.

Sally would have squirmed even more but Buttons was gazing at her, then to Sssserek, and then she realized Iggy was not with them.

"What's going on? Out with it, Sally. What are you two up to? If you don't answer me, so help me, I'll . . ."

The small voice of Iggy came plaintively from the bottom of the hill. "Please, Great Ssserek, please."

Ssserek relented slightly and nodded into the darkness. "You may."

There was a scrambling rush as Iggy made his way to Sally's side. He nodded down the hill and then placed himself so that Sally was between him and Buttons.

Buttons's voice was becoming harsh. The day had been too much. Her grief was almost drowning her. She curled her lips and was about to snarl

when a small figure wavered and staggered slowly up the hill.

Buttons sat with a plop, dumbfounded, muddled, and entirely confused. It was a small cat, none too steady. But, head down, it was not about to quit as it tripped repeatedly. Soon, it stood at Buttons's side, leaning against her.

"Oooaaarrrrhh," he crooned as he looked up. Love and affection were there, but Buttons could only sit as she viewed the small cat. The small kitten's eyes kept crossing as he did his best to convey his pleasure.

Iggy piped up. "It's a him. And, look at his eyes. Wow! How he got this far is a wonder."

"I'll call him Cross-eye. Mommy Kitty didn't mind. It's her last, you see."

This was too much. "Ssserek," Buttons wailed. Her nose went, up and once again her voice dropped as her lament rose to the moon.

"Oooorrrrrroooo!"

The End

# How the Littlest Dragon Saves the Day

Buttons lay just outside the white fence in the shade of a small lilac bush. Her black nose quivered between her two front paws and her sharp little ears twitched to the near and far sounds coming her way from the Great Field and Forest. The light summer breeze added little to what her active ears heard.

Suddenly, a motion high overhead caught her attention. She rolled over onto her back and looked up into the wide blue expanse over her yard. The sky seemed filled with birds—all making a beeline to the Great Forest. How strange! Most of the birds were huge brown and red hawks, uncommonly seen so near man's habitations. Some were friends she recognized—some were not. Then, she noticed tiny flashes of brilliant color. Stranger still! Hummingbirds! The air was filled with hummingbirds—and they were weren't even fighting with each other as they usually did. They were all buzzing straight toward the hill, a small grass-covered knoll in the Great Forest.

Buttons got up to pace, intently watching the sky. Crows and crackles of all sizes were moving toward the knoll, their voices filling the air with loud caws and crackling gossip, when another sound intruded upon her mind. It was Sally, the beagle making her quiet way through tufts of grass and around the small, scattered clumps of brush. Soon, she could be seen as she scurried about brushes and twigs, her small, well-formed hand held erect, ears flapping. Sally was breathing hard as she abruptly stopped in front of Buttons, her ears laid back along her head, wonder and concern written across her features. Buttons smiled. She was always pleased to see her best friend. The two small dogs greeted one another, nose touching nose, bright brown eyes looking squarely into bright brown eyes. Before either could even yip, however, the angry words of Iggy, the ground squirrel, could be heard.

He was obviously berating Biff, the bear, and as expected, Iggy hurried from the field just in front of the lumbering Biff who was huffing close behind. Iggy started to speak before he could completely halt, but was caught by surprise as Biff sat and skidded to a stop on his round rump. Biff's round belly stuffed with the first ripe berries of spring slammed into Iggy, sending him tumbling head over heels. The rising dust covered most of Biff and, of course, all of Iggy who could only cough and gag as the dust began to settle on him.

Iggy rapidly scrambled to his feet, glaring into Biff's round features. Biff grinned hugely as he watched his small friend whose angry features were all but hidden by the coat of settling dust.

"You, you, you . . . ," was all Iggy, the squirrel could get out before having to sneeze several times. Loud, very loud, and directly into the laughing face of Biff.

Both Sally and Buttons broke into chuckles as Iggy began to shake himself.

In his turn, Biff, the bear looked carefully at the small squirrel, and then he, too, began to laugh, his round sides heaving as he tried to contain his merriment.

Iggy grinned sheepishly, feeling very silly. Then, he looked about him, surveying his close friends. Then, he began to giggle, but the dust got the better of him. He sneezed, although he tried valiantly not to, but it was no good. He sneezed again, and then again, his small beady eyes peering out from behind his dusky mask.

As usual, they all broke into gales of laughter, Biff finally lying on the ground rolling to and fro. It was one of the bear's better tricks on the little trickster Iggy.

Finally, they all gained some control of their laughter, and each sat, Biff and Iggy side by side as they looked to their friends, Sally and Buttons. Smirking at one another, they felt as foolish as they looked, but they couldn't help it.

Then, their expressions changed, slowly at first, then very quickly as they rose to confront Buttons. Dusty and dirty as they were, their faces spoke for them. Something was up as their looks moved from grins, to questioning, then to wonder.

Buttons sighed.

“What’s up now,” she inquired, looking from the fat bear to the small squirrel.

Iggy began to scratch himself as he also began to talk, his words coming in short bursts between his more vigorous bouts of digging at himself.

“Well . . .” Scratch, scratch . . .”It’s this way.” Scratch, scratch . . .”We were . . . uh . . . Just at the hill.”

Biff broke in. “We were at the berries when suddenly . . .”

Iggy kicked the fat bear right in his fat flank. Of course, there was absolutely no effect as he began again, the words tumbling one after the other.

“Hey, it’s my story. You were just stuffing yourself as usual when it . . .”

Biff put one large paw out and easily swept the small squirrel aside, as he began again, “Ya, and it was the darndest thing. Wow, wait until you see . . .”

Iggy’s screech of indignation interrupted even the usually imperturbable bear who glanced down to see what was causing the squirrel so much trouble.

Iggy was furious at the interruption and was hopping up and down. “You, you, bubble-brained, over-stuffed . . .” His breath gave out and he suddenly sat, plopping to the ground in sheer frustration.

Biff grinned. This was more like it. “Well, it is the darndest . . .”

“Stop your sputtering,” barked Sally. “Let’s go!”

Sally led the way with Buttons right behind. They quickly made their way through rough grass and brush, until shortly they were entering the



Great Forest. Here, Sally turned and headed slightly more northward, veering one way and another as she found the easiest path. The heat of the sun was quickly lost as they entered the deeper portions of the great woods where the larger trees blocked out the direct rays of the sun.

Soon, a clearing could be made out in the distance, and then abruptly, the trees ended, leaving an irregular opening which was brightly lit by a sun almost directly overhead. In the middle and slightly off to one side, a small grass-covered mound rose.

In the trees nearest to the hill were many hawks of all species. They sat silently as they watched something on the hill. The trees glittered with the glory of hundreds of hummingbirds, their small figures barely visible individually. But the sparkling iridescence was incredible against the muted browns and blacks of the hawks. Contrary to their usual obstreperous behavior and ongoing fights, the hummingbirds sat quietly, intently watching the hill like the hawks below them.

It was an eerie and uncanny scene which had never been seen in the Great Forest that greeted Sally and Buttons. Sally abruptly halted, Buttons almost running into her. Each took a deep breath before continuing toward the hill. But it was an even stranger sight which greeted them as they moved toward the spot so keenly watched by the birds.

There, almost at the top of the rounded mount sat a creature neither they nor any creature of forest and field had ever seen. At first, Buttons thought it was a very large and hairless cat, somewhat long in the body with a short, pointed tail. But it was without fur, and soft brown in color. Its head was hung low, on a long sinuous neck, with its nose almost buried in the ground. Slender ears were laid back against the sinewy neck. Clearly, the hind quarters were larger than the fore. Its sides were heaving with emotion.



Soft sobbing sounds came to their ears as they approached the creature from behind.

Buttons coughed gently and the small creature lifted its head, turning as it did so to view the two. Sally's first impression was of huge lambent eyes, tears welling in them as the creature looked down at her. Buttons smiled. Surely, they were the most beautiful soft brown eyes she had ever seen, great pools of sadness, whirling with depths she had never before seen. Both small dogs approached, heads hung low.

The eyes were not the most remarkable thing about the creature, although clearly the most memorable. Folded neatly across her back were transparent wings, appearing too small and fragile for the creature, or for any creature her size, foreshadowing a strength yet unknown.

The brown creature looked down at the two approaching dogs. Her clean, smooth head tapered slightly to a rounded short snout. She raised her left forepaw and wiped a tear off. Her paw was tapered with long fingers and blunted claws. She held the paw delicately poised at her eye as she viewed them carefully.

Then, she sobbed, and raising her head upward, cried aloud, the small voice carrying across the woods and field. Hawks fanned their wings as hummingbirds whirled in giddy spirals above her head. They all felt her sadness, and the deeply hidden anguish, but none knew what to do.

Buttons sighed. Well, this is a new one, that was for sure. Just what to do. She didn't know offhand and she looked about, seeing for the first time that all of the creatures present were looking at her intently.

Buttons smiled her best smile and walked up the hill further so that she was more on a level with the brown creature. The creature watched her expectantly and did not miss the attention the others were giving the small black dog. Her brown eyes glittered, a bit of steeliness coming into them.

Buttons did not miss the look in the creature's eyes, and the small Scottie lowered her head just a little bit before addressing the creature. "May I be of service?" She stood very still as she spoke, watching the eyes only, but noting once again that the brown creature was near to tears once again.

"Oooohhh," wailed the creature. "Where's the queen?"

Buttons smiled once again. "We have several queens in our midst, but whom in particular do you wish to see?" Her tone was soft, neither too sharp nor too artificial. Buttons waited.

Haughtily, the creature started to raise her head, but quickly noted the smile on the small dog's face. The creature sighed deeply, and answered, "The queen, of course, the one and only true queen." She faltered in her response. "Well, I mean, a queen always attends to me, and well . . ."

Buttons smiled more broadly. The brown creature sighed once again, more deeply. This wasn't going at all well.

"Oh, my," the creature sighed. She raised her head and slowly surveyed the surrounding forest. Then, she sobbed loudly.

"I'm lost," she cried. "I'm lost." The tears now came in floods, running freely down her face to cascade about Buttons and Sally. "I'm terribly lost. And . . . I'm so lonely." A catch in her voice momentarily stopped her, forcing her to take a long, deep breath.

"Perhaps," Buttons broke in softly, "if you would tell us more about yourself. We've never met anyone quite like you."

"Well, of course not." The words escaped the small brown creature before she could catch herself. "Well, I mean, I wouldn't expect you would have. I mean, I am the only one like me."

Iggy's voice came from the bottom of the hill. "Boy, I can believe that."

Buttons and Sally glared at the precocious squirrel just before Biff unceremoniously sat upon his small friend, only a tiny squeak coming from beneath the smirking bear. The small creature tried to hide a sudden grin behind her dainty paw, but failed before the quick eyes of Sally and Buttons.

The creature spoke up, "Perhaps, if your friend wishes to come closer, we wouldn't mind."

Sally started to say something but was nudged by Buttons.

"Oh, the royal . . . we ?"

Buttons winked. "Right."

Both Sally and Buttons approached. Buttons looked up and smiled, her small black eyes gleaming with humor and friendship.

"Perhaps, if we knew you." Buttons sat and waited.

"Well, you see." The creature sniffed, trying to keep a tear from forming.

Iggy couldn't bear the waiting any longer and bounced up the hill to place himself directly in front of the creature. "Look, dummy, we can't forever be calling you *creature*."

"What's your name? You do have one, don't you?"

"Well, of course." She sniffed once again, but this time it wasn't because she felt like crying. She lifted her head ever so slightly, cocking it so as to glare more effectively at the disheveled squirrel who so boldly faced her.

"You," and she left little doubt that she meant Iggy only, "may address me as Darling Princess Vintrix Sarandra, Protectress of the Upper Reaches."

"Wow," was all Iggy could say as he abruptly sat.

Biff's gruff but humor-filled voice came from the bottom of the hill. "That'll take care of you, you little twit."

Princess Vintrix Sarandra went on, arching an eyebrow as she did so, "And," she sniffed haughtily once again, "all lower life forms." She couldn't help adding, "of course," as she glared balefully from Iggy to Biff.

Both Buttons and Sally were grinning broadly. That the small creature's eyes were beginning to twinkle had not escaped their keen inspection.

Of course, Iggy had seen the exchange between Princess Sarandra and his two best friends. Boldly surveying the new creature, he lifted himself to his full, and rather insignificant, height, and snorted. "Come on, get real. We'll just call you Sara." Then, he had to add as he ducked her swinging head, "just for short."

Before matters could out of hand, Buttons intervened. "Uh, if you approve, your highness. How about it, Princess Sarandra?"

"Oh, gosh, yes, I've never had such a name, or friends like you." She turned and surveyed the clearing and all of the birds in the trees.

She lowered her head to whisper in Buttons's ears. "Gosh, aren't they beautiful, the small ones? And, of course, the hawks are so stately." Her whisper carried clearly to all parts of the clearing and the trees, causing much ruffling of plumage and pirouettes by the hummingbirds. Her words were most appreciated.

Sally smiled as she inquired, "And, you will tell us something about yourself?"

Sara sighed deeply as painful memory after painful memory raced across her mind. She began slowly at first, but then, raising her head proudly, continued with only brief pauses between her words.

"I'm a dragon, of course." She raised herself on her hind legs, fanning her beautiful wings. "Of course, I'm not very big yet, but we're a long-lived race. Though there's not many of us anymore." She looked about her, the longing and hurt clearly etched in her youthful features.

She glanced around at her newfound friends. “There’s so many of each of you. It must be nice.” She sighed once again.

The irrepressible Iggy nudged her, his eyes large in his sharp features. “Gee whiz, I thought dragons were huge and ferocious.”

“Do you breathe fire too?”

Sara smiled wanly. “We do get pretty big. In time. But I’m still young.”

Iggy was not to be denied. “Yeah, but what about the fire-breathing?” He grinned smugly at Buttons.

Sara drooped, her shoulders sagging as she looked at her small inquisitor. Her voice was almost imperceptible even to the keen ears of the dogs and other woodland creatures.

“I can’t.”

“What?” Iggy was indignant.

He would have continued, but Biff, the bear had closed up behind at a glance from Sally. The bear placed both broad paws around the small squirrel and gently squeezed, effectively muffling all protests as he carried Iggy unceremoniously down the hill.

When Iggy could breathe again, he harshly demanded of Biff, “Hey, you big lummoX, what’s the idea? Gosh, I wouldn’t hurt her feelings for anything.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Just be quiet for a while, will ya?”

Buttons grinned at Sara, who had watched the proceedings with increasing interest. “Do you know what you have to do to begin breathing fire?”

Sara raised her shoulders and let them drop as she shook her head negatively. “I didn’t get that far in my lessons before I got lost.” She dropped her head conspiratorially. “The world’s a lot bigger than I thought. I’ve been wandering for a long time.”

“So tell us about it . . .”

And Sara began to tell her new friends how she came to be in their forest.

“You see the world is very large, as I had been taught, but I forgot that and wandered away from the great mountains which the very few dragons in the world inhabit. My lessons were very complete, of course, and I thought I knew it all.” She sighed, “But, I didn’t.

She went on as the creatures of the forest and field listened. Sara continued, “I started out heading east. Well, anyway, so I thought, but . . .” She looked at Buttons, who smiled encouragingly. Sara smiled back, and taking a deep breath, went on. “I got out over water, sooner than I should have if I were truly heading east.”

Buttons stepped forward. “And of course, you weren’t. Right?”

Sara giggled a little, blushing as she nodded. “I’m not very good at directions, you see. I went on for a very long time, getting very tired before I sighted land.”

“Ours, right?” Iggy interposed.

“Well, yes and no. You see I still had ways to go, long ways before I landed here. Not many open areas at first, and I was frightened.”

As Sara went on to tell of her trip across the eastern part of the United States, Buttons looked at Sally, who in turn, glanced at Iggy and Biff. The latter pair slowly approached Sara once again. Respectfully this time. Iggy gently placed one very small paw on one of Sara’s forelegs, as Buttons whispered something into Biff’s ear.

“Don’t you worry. Buttons will figure it out.”

Iggy placed himself between Buttons and the small dragon as Biff turned away and scurried into the forest, rapidly disappearing into its depths. Iggy fastened his keen eyes on the black dog. “So, what’s wrong, huh?”

“Look, it’s simple. You can’t have fire on demand without something to set it off. Right?”

“Yeah, if you say so,” muttered Iggy.

“And, you’ve got to have something that burns. Right?”

“Well, sure,” said Iggy, beginning to brighten up. “Boy, that’s pretty good, Buttons. Always thinking.”

Sara suddenly fanned her wings as a crashing sound came clearly to those crowded around the hill. Clearly agitated, she began to rise to her tallest when Iggy grabbed at one forepaw.

“Easy, Sara, easy. It’s just Biff, the bear. Never did learn to go around when he could smash straight through.”

Buttons and Sally quickly reaffirmed Iggy’s impression, and Sara was settling down when Biff came crashing into the clearing, dragging a blackened bag behind. Plopping the bag at Buttons’s feet, he had to stop for a moment as he was panting hard. “Got it,” grinned Biff. I brought the whole bag. Easier that way.”

Sara was rapidly glancing from one speaker to the other as the discussion went on. Her eyebrows were rising higher and higher.

The bear grinned hugely. “There. How do you like that?”

It was Buttons’s turn to grin as she said, “Knew you could do it. Any problems?”

“Nope. In and out so fast no one ever knew I was around.” He looked skyward, not mentioning the door on the old barn that he had ripped from its rusty hinges, gazing about so that Buttons couldn’t detect anything amiss.

Sally coughed, taking Buttons’s attention from the bear.

Buttons raised first one eyebrow and then the other, but said no more on that topic. “Sure, OK. So much for that.”

She turned to Sara. “How do you like coal?”

“Huh?” responded the dragon. She looked from the bag to Buttons to Iggy and back to the bear. “Well, I’ve never had any.”



As Biff began to tear at the bag, Sara poked Buttons with her muzzle. “Just what is it?”

“Fire stuff.” Buttons’s eyes were wide and innocent as she commented, “All you do is chew it up, build up some gas, and blow it out. After we’ve lit your pilot light, of course.”

Sara looked hard and long at the small black dog, but could detect no sign of doubt. However, she recognized the hushed and expectant audience were becoming increasingly restless. To her credit, she was game, and taking a very deep breath, said, “OK, but . . .”

Sally smiled broadly. “Don’t worry. All dragons have to breathe fire. You will, too.”

The hawks and hummingbirds all exchanged nervous glances. “Fire? Here?” In the Great Forest? Nothing terrified all creatures of wood and field more than fire.

Just what was the black dog up to now? Yet, for all their fears, they trusted her implicitly. They hunkered down, each in their own way, waiting. It was not easy though and some fearful mutterings could be heard within the forest.

Small black blocks spilled onto the ground as Biff finished opening the bag.

“There’s your coal. Now, chew up a couple of the briquets.” Buttons and Sally waited to see what Sara would do.

The small dragon sniffed at the coal and pushed one briquet tentatively around with her nose. She glanced at Buttons and then at Biff. Iggy pushed into the fore so that he stood directly in front of the dragon with Biff. Iggy had gone and returned. He nodded to Buttons and gave a quick grin. In his paws was a small stick with a bright red rounded tip. Sara had never seen a match before.

Sara picked up one briquet and slowly moved it around her mouth. Her words were somewhat garbled as she addressed the crowd in

general, “Not very tasty, you know.”

Sara looked to the sky as though in silent prayer. Then, doing as she was bid, she began to chew, slowly grinding the charcoal.

“Chew it up fine,” cautioned Buttons. “It’ll make gas better that way.”

Sara did as she was bade, and continued chewing the coal into smaller and smaller bits and then swallowed.

Iggy watched the lump move down her throat. “Wow, she did it,” he breathed out in hushed admiration.

Sara’s eyes seemed to cross for a moment as she savored the aftertaste. “Oh my,” she said. “It’s sort of heavy in there, you know.”

“That’s all right,” soothed Buttons. “The gas will be along shortly. Just let it perk.”

“Gosh, I don’t know about this,” burped Sara. Her eyes began to wander as she contemplated the bubbling sensations which were beginning to emanate from her innards. “Are you sure?” she burbled.

“You’re doing fine,” Buttons reassured her

As events were clearly coming to a head, all the small woodland creatures began to gather more closely around the small group. Birds vied for better perches and a better view.

Sara groaned and many were the sympathetic groans echoing her obvious discomfiture. Sara dropped to the ground and rolled around, her paws pressed to her stomach, as rumbling sounds issued from her partially open mouth. More groans came from the surrounding forest, and Biff, the bear hugged his big belly in wide-eyed empathy.

“Oh, my, my poor stomach,” Sara moaned. “I feel like I’m going to explode. Oh my, oh me.”

“Wow,” Iggy commiserated, “oh, wow!”

Buttons stepped closer. “Easy now, Sara. It will be alright. You’ll get used to it. You just have to learn to control the right amount each time.”

Iggy piped in, “Yeh, you’ll see. Nothing to it.”

Biff shook his head and smiled reassuringly at the dragon. He knew no words were going to help too much at this point in time. He waited.

As Sara burped once again, Buttons said, “OK, you’re just about there. Now, listen carefully. Just take a deep breath and we’ll light your pilot light. You concentrate on keeping it lit. Just a little flame, remember.”

Sara moaned and her eyes crossed as she gazed at her friends, who seemed to waver about her. “I’ll try.”

She did as she was told, carefully sitting erect as she took a slow and deep breath. Buttons motioned to Iggy to light the match, for that was what she had sent him for. Only the very facile squirrel could manage a match. She wouldn’t trust the raccoon twins who had just appeared at the edge of the crowd, or the river otters who would more than likely set everything aflame.



Iggy struck the match against a stone placed before Sara for that purpose. But Sara had held her breath as long as she could, and the inner rumblings were crescendoing at a faster and faster pace.

The match blazed into life, and there were many ohs and ahs from the surrounding crowd. Iggy triumphantly held it up, carefully placing it before Sara's nose.

She belched.

There is not a word for the explosive burst which escaped Sara. The erupting gases billowed out and around Iggy. There was a tremendous blast, as gas and flame united. Iggy disappeared into a cloud of flame and smoke. Creatures cried aloud and fled in all directions. Buttons, Sally, and Biff tumbled down the hill, coming to rest on their respective backsides.

They all glanced quickly at Sara who remained where she was, but now with a marveling gaze on her face.

And Iggy?

Well, he, too, stood exactly where he was, still holding the match, but a badly charred and crumpling match. Gone were his whiskers, his pride and joy, his well-kept though ragged whiskers. Now, only a few stubby remains could be seen, sticking out of his blackened and soot-covered features.

He gazed around, breathing carefully and slowly. He looked at the small dragon who was beginning to grin in spite of her inner turmoil. He glanced around for Buttons and Sally, who were sitting up with Biff.

Iggy felt his sides and face, sought out his ears, which, like his nose, were frazzled and blackened, and rubbed his eyes in disbelief.

Then, placing a paw to nose, he sneezed and reeled backwards, tumbling down the hill to come to rest at Buttons's feet.

Buttons laughed as Iggy got to his feet. Iggy frowned, and then he, too, laughed. He leaped aright, holding one paw over his chest and the other in the air, a salute, and he announced, "Our dragon is lit."

Just then, everyone turned as they became aware of the sound of pounding hooves and the thunderous approach of Boomer, the young bison. The Great Forest filled with the sound of his heavy hooves hitting the ground. There could be no mistake as the earth seemed to bounce as the sounds approached. And, obviously, he was in a hurry, for as they looked up, his figure could be seen tearing through brush, bushes, and everything else in his way as he raced toward the small group.

Iggy sat up to better view the racing bison. "Wow, oh, wow, I wonder what's up. He never hurries that way."

Sally glanced hurriedly from Biff to Buttons. Iggy was right, the small bison was literally tearing his way to them, brush and bush flying from his heels, the dust rising in small whirlwinds.

He skidded to a stop in front of Buttons, the dust rising as it did around Iggy and Biff, only to settle on all of them, causing much coughing and glares as it settled. The bison was puffing heavily, having come some distance. Taking a deep breath, he blurted out, "The White Mustang is missing. The rats have him. The herd is frantic and don't know what to do. And . . ." He would have continued with his staccato delivery, but Buttons interrupted.

"Easy, Boomer. Catch your breath. What do you mean 'the White Mustang is missing'?"

The young colt who was born to the herd was the latest to bear that name, only one White Mustang being born into the herd every few decades, representing the strength and freedom of all creatures, never to be broken to

halter or saddle. Buttons and Sally, the only creatures having any relationship to man, had been proud to be present at his birth and knew how important he was to the horse herds of Oklahoma.

Boomer's sides heaved with the exertion of his race across the field and forest, but slowly brought himself under control.

"It's awful. What they did." He looked at each one in turn, his great brown eyes tearing up even as he spoke. None could recall the young bison ever being so badly disturbed.

Sally approached him, and sitting, peered long and hard into his sad eyes. "Out with it, Boomer. What happened?" Her ears were pulled back against her head in her mounting anger and concern.

Having overcome their initial fright over Sara's first flame, birds and other animals of the forest had slowly regained their positions around the glade. They now moved closer, their anxiety clearly rising as they listened.

Boomer, the bison continued, "It was the rats. We haven't heard anything in so long a time, we'd forgotten." He sighed, his flanks heaving with suppressed emotion. "They attacked the mare late this morning as she returned from feeding. Two attacked her forelegs, biting her hard enough to partially cripple her." His voice became steely. "It cost the two rats their lives, but it was enough to slow her." He sighed again, more loudly as he recalled the events of that terrible moment.

"Several other rats led the poor, frightened colt away." Boomer raised his head, looking long and hard at the Great Forest. He would have sobbed for the lost colt, but he was too proud.

"Frightened as he was, they couldn't make him leave his mother without nipping at him continuously. The birds and creatures in the trees saw it all. He would have fought, puny as his new legs were, but he didn't have the strength, and there were too many. They harassed him constantly. Never let him get near his frantic mother. She lost sight of them very quickly." Buttons broke in. "Look, Boomer, where did they take him? Surely, the birds could have seen."

“Yes, they did see. The birds saw it all, but only to the swamp.” As an afterthought, he added, “Silly birds, they were too terrified to follow any further.”

He sagged, his strength ebbing for a short while as his friends looked on.

“Easy, easy, Boomer. We’re with you,” Buttons spoke the minds of all there.

“Where was the herd?” queried Iggy, his eyes large in his head as he thought of the repercussions. “They must have heard.”

Boomer looked at his small friend, Iggy, who was standing on his hind legs to get that little bit closer. The bison smiled briefly, “Yes, the cries of the mare could be heard, but the colt was gone before the stallions arrived. They tore the forest apart in their anger and would have attempted to cross the swamp by themselves. Fortunately, they were stopped.”

Biff huffed and puffed at the news. “Well,” he said, “what happened? Who could stop them? Even we, bears would have been hard-pressed against the herd.”

Buttons smiled. “I can guess. Delph, the gator, right?” She glanced from one to the other, her eyes saying much for the strength and support of her friends.

“Well, it was Delph, the alligator who stopped the first rush into the swamp. But he couldn’t have held them back, not even in his own domain. The stallions were furious beyond sense or fear.”

Sally glanced at Buttons, and both nodded in turn. There could only be one creature who could stand up to the stallions and have any chance of coming out of it alive.

“Ssserek, the snake,” they said in unison.

Boomer shuffled his hooves. “Ya, ya, it was Ssserek. Boy, did he bring those stallions to a complete stop. They practically ran over one another in

their hurry to get away from him as he rose from the water at Delph's side. What a sight that was." He grinned at the recollection.

"It had been impressive, all the great stallions roaring in their anger as they entered the water, the first appearance of Delph as he porpoised into view like a superpowered submarine. The angrier young ones would have attacked the alligator, but then, suddenly and unexpectedly, there was the incredible head of Ssserek, turning from side to side as he glared at them. His hiss of anger stopped them cold in their tracks. Their anger cooled real quick in his presence and Ssserek sent me to find you."

Everyone started to speak at the same time, suggestions flying from the creatures now crowding around the hill. The noise was growing rapidly in volume, and angry words could be heard.

Everything stopped when Buttons barked, "Hold it, everyone. Just take it easy. We're all going to have work together!" Then, properly hushed, they all gathered around the small Scottie, forming a semicircle of close friends, waiting for her next words.

At first, Sara had sat totally puzzled by the sudden flurry of activity with the arrival of Boomer, the bison. But Iggy had sidled up close to her and whispered hurried explanations into her appreciative ear as the bison had explained the situation as well as telling the small dragon about the swamp, Delph, the alligator, and Ssserek the great rattlesnake. Sara's eyes grew larger as Buttons spoke again.

"First, we're going to need greater numbers and strength and size if we are to move across the swamp. The horses are too big and could never make it through the deep muck however much they might try."

"Ah, Buttons," Boomer interrupted softly. "I already told Milo, the moose as I passed the zoo. He was under his favorite tree as usual."

Buttons grinned at Sally, then answered Boomer. "You did fine. I know of no one better able to handle the swamp. Boomer grinned broadly at the praise.



Buttons quickly organized her forest friends. “I want Elmer, the Saint Bernard. He can swim all day. She looked into the trees, seeking out a particular hummingbird. “Pip, where are you,” she yipped.

The smallest and brightest of hummingbirds suddenly appeared above her head, turning upside down, the better to watch the Scottie.

“Now, remember this long enough to get them to the swamp in time,” Buttons admonished the smallest of birds. “Tell Elmer where to meet us and then go find Rarebit, the frog. No one knows the swamp better than him. Now, off with you.”

Pip would have responded in his usual hurried fashion, but knew all too well the importance of the White Mustang to the great horse herds and to the forest and field in general. He simply disappeared so quickly and went about his business.

Sara watched the small bird with great interest and then pushed forward, ever so slightly. “Buttons?” she said in shy, low tones. “Can I help? I mean, well . . .” Her voice disappeared weakly as she scanned the many creatures who now turned their attention back to her.

Sally nudged Buttons, and the two close friends needed no more communication.

“I know of no one who could be of greater use,” said Buttons and looked about acknowledging the ready acceptance of the small dragon.

Sara, who had dropped her head at her rash suggestion, raised it quickly at the rapid acceptance. She grinned at the two small dogs and at Iggy who beamed joyously at the newcomer. Scared she might be, but she was rapidly gaining confidence as other creatures made known their ready appreciation of her offer.

All Sara could say was “Wow” as she settled back to await events.

Buttons quickly organized the forest friends. The discussion was brief, and the marching order was decided. Biff, the bear was to lead off, closely followed by Boomer. Behind them came the two dogs, with Iggy at their

side. To the joy of all, Sara had spread her wonderful wings and lifted into the air gracefully and swiftly, circling overhead.

Thus, the group moved more quickly and with greater confidence as they made their way through the forest to the swamp. The path taken by Biff was easily traversed by the group selected to tackle the rats. They soon arrived at the Great Swamp.

As they broke from the covering forest, Buttons had raced up to the great serpent and joyfully greeted him with a warm kiss on his broad snout. Ssserek smiled as he always did when meeting the Scotty dog, and, if the truth were to be known, there were those in the crowd who shuttered inwardly. His great wisdom and strength were sincerely appreciated by all inhabitants of the forest and field; nonetheless, few sought him out willingly.

Sara wheeled overhead, taking the scene in, and then had turned to swoop in, landing beside the serpent and the dog. Ssserek rose to his fullest height as the young dragon landed, and then slowly inclined his head in greeting.

“Welcome, your most gracious highness, Princess Vintrix Sarandra. Your presence is both a joy and pleasant surprise. Welcome to our forest and field, may you grow in even greater beauty.”

Sara’s eyes were bright as she solemnly bowed, then she curtsied as she replied, “Great is the fame of Ssserek among our brethren, your wisdom most esteemed, your strength notable among the mightiest, your cunning told and retold around our fires.”

Iggy’s voice came from the rear of the group. “Boy, listen to them. At this rate, the horse will be tail only.”

The serpent suddenly appeared before the squirrel. He lifted one eyebrow as he bent down to squarely face Iggy who, to his credit, had not moved. “Yessss, my young friend. You’re correct. We must move quickly, but not so quickly that all civility is lost or the correct amenities are forgotten. You do agree?”

He cocked his head, listening.

Iggy's throat had suddenly constricted at the snake's sudden appearance, but he was never without words. "Well, well," he coughed, "then let's be off." And suiting action to words, he moved as quickly and nimbly as his small legs would permit, racing through the crowd to take refuge against Sara's side.

Ssserek laughed aloud and moved toward the swamp where everyone waited. "Buttons," Ssserek said, "you and Sally will go with Delph. Moose and bear can be our forward guard. Otters and raccoons, keep to the rear and sides, keeping an eye out for anything unusual. Bison and Saint Bernard will rove, keeping an eye on our friend, the peccary. If he sinks, fine." His eyes had sparkled in good humor, although the small peccary was not so sure he didn't mean it. "But don't let him tarry over the succulence of the water greens."

Ssserek paused as he gazed about the group. It was a fine crowd, not to be taken lightly, clearly representing the forest and field. They would do the job, whatever it might require. Then, he gazed closely upon Iggy who waited with bated breath. "Well, my little friend, just what are we to do with you. Hardly a mouthful for any self-respecting rat."

Iggy came to his fullest height and would have answered boldly, but Sara nudged him before he could open his mouth.

She was smiling as she addressed Ssserek. "I do not know how I can be of assistance to you, but in my small way, I will do all I can."

Ssserek nodded in return, trying mightily to suppress the grin which strove so hard to escape him. "Hmmm, well-said, your most gracious highness."

Then, he could no longer repress the grin as he laughed, "Yes, go on. Do it, wisest of dragons, it'll not be forgotten." He turned to nod to Buttons who had placed herself between the eye knobs of Delph, the gator in preparation for getting underway, as Iggy muttered to himself, "Course, she's the wisest. She's the only dragon here." Then, more loudly, he said,

“OK, so I’m not of much use. I’ll stay behind.” He pouted as he slumped disconsolately to the ground as Delph moved offshore, with the two dogs perched on his back.

The otters quickly moved into their assigned positions as the twin raccoons took up their places. Bear and moose surged ahead of the party, making their way silently and surely through the murky waters. Dog and bison moved in behind as Ssserek swiftly made his way to the alligator’s side. Bobcat, peccary, and others who would be part of the party moved forward also, ignoring the small squirrel watching unhappily from the shore.

Elmer, the large Saint Bernard, brushed by Iggy and entered the water smoothly. He swiftly swam to the fore where his great strength would be most useful. He briefly greeted the alligator and snake, and smiled warmly at Buttons and Sally, the two dogs he considered with greatest esteem.

Iggy sighed. He wasn’t very big, and not at all good in a fight, particularly since he always got beaten. But he always fought hard and never failed to give his best. Nuts! He hated being left behind. He turned to enter the forest when Sara, who had not left yet, coughed.

Her eyes gleamed, and the warmth and affection contained therein was almost too much for the ground squirrel. “Come, my little fire bringer,” she said softly, “let us show them how to do it.” She motioned to her back.

Iggy wanted to shout, but words failed him. He wanted to dance, but there was no time. He did what Sara bade him to do. He raced over to her, and with a giant leap, launched himself onto her shoulders. Iggy gripped Sara’s neck with all his strength.

His breath did indeed leave him as the small dragon launched herself into the air, leaping straight upward as she fanned her wings. Iggy’s small paws gripped as hard as he could as they soared over their group of friends. He wanted to shout, but couldn’t. Keeping his stomach with him was all he could handle for several seconds. But being a squirrel and accustomed to leaping from branch to branch high above the ground, unlike most ground squirrels, he quickly adapted to the new and incredible sensations of flying.

Then, he shouted. With joy and with glee and with all of his strength. What fun!

Sara circled and dipped as she passed over the swimming group, Iggy waving one paw as his enthusiasm and confidence grew. A dozen hawks soared higher in the air, watching for any unsuspected movement, no better guardians as they were. Around Sara's head glittered many hummingbirds, the smallest leading them in complex spirals and turns, always moving just in front of the small dragon and her joyous rider. Directly in front was the small frog, who indeed had explored every nook and cranny of the swamp. To the amazement of all, Delph had formed a firm friendship with the frog who was often to be found resting comfortably on the alligator's back. Hardly a small morsel to the ever-voracious alligator. Delph had come to respect the frog's keen wit and knowledge of the large swamp.

Rat Island soon appeared, even hidden as it was in the deepest and darkest part of the swamp. The group had taken the shortest way possible. Like the surrounding silent water, the island was shrouded in gloom with large dead trees of many past years tossed up against the banks. Moss drooped from trunks and broken limbs, and the shadows were black. Nothing could be heard, the silence was thick everywhere. A single clearing could be seen and, it was toward that that the group directed their way.

As Delph—with Ssserek in front and the bear and moose on either side—climbed ashore, a huge rat silently moved onto the sand. His fur was silver and his features were sharply pointed. Hatred clung to him like an evil cloud as he surveyed the group. He knew them, but if he feared them, it could not be seen. The five, with Buttons and Sally clambering to the sand to stand beside Delph, slowly advanced toward the rat. As they did so, the shadows behind seemed to move, and then many large rats gathered behind their elder leader.

Each party slowly surveyed the other, taking in numbers and strength. As they did so, hawks took up positions on dead trees, and the hummingbirds silently settled on the highest branches. This could not be the affair of the latter, but, nonetheless, their support was there for the rats to

see and wonder at. On the other hand, the hawks were to be feared as they leaned forward to listen.

The elder rat hissed suddenly, "And to what do we owe this unwelcome intrusion? You have no rights here. Go away." The last was spat out, his large eyes gleaming red and balefully.

Buttons spoke up, her voice clear and vibrant. "We have come for the White Mustang. As you well know, you cannot keep him."

"We know you, little busybody. Go away."

Buttons moved ahead of her friends "We are here for the White Mustang. We will not leave without him," she repeated.

The large rat stepped forward, and his fearsome minions moved ahead, their teeth gleaming cruelly in the shadows.

"We do not fear you, little know-it-all. Go away Take this rabble with you, and leave us in peace."

Sally and Ssserek moved as one, taking position at Buttons's shoulders, with Delph right behind. Sally spoke.

"You know we will not leave. Your foul army cannot win."

The old rat hissed loudly at the intrusion and was about to threaten further when he was abruptly interrupted by the sudden appearance of Sara, with Iggy clinging to her neck. She whirled over the heads of the rats, sending many scurrying for shelter within the dark confines of their evil island.

Then, she settled to the ground, almost landing on the large rat who was forced by her precipitous descent to scuttle backwards, hissing as he did so.

Iggy's squeaky voice could be heard as he loudly whispered in Sara's ear. "Great landing."

The elder rat would have launched himself in retaliation on the little squirrel, but Sara preemptively swung her head down and around so that her nose was almost touching the rat's.

“Good afternoon. I am Sarandra. How are you?”

Her soft dulcet tones made the old rat cringe inwardly for the second time, but he was made of stern stuff and did not budge.

“Another soft-bodied snack, I vow,” sneered the rat.

“Fine day, is it not?” Not to be outdone was Sara.

“A brown bag of chewies, it seems,” he hissed.

“Oh, father of rats, may your whiskers grow ever more bushy,” cooed Sara.

Buttons moved forward one more time and slowly eyed King Rat.

Ignoring the dragon, his eyes blazed as he spoke, “We’ll not leave our prize to you without harsh payment.” He glared at Sally who smiled back.

Ssserek leaned forward menacingly. “What will it be?”

Buttons smiled as sweetly as Scotties can, which, after all, is rather winning. To no avail. The old rat was not to be budged.

Ssserek rose in the air, and then he smiled, beckoning to Buttons and Sara to approach him. The otters and raccoons caught their collective breath and waited. No one knew what was going to happen when Scotties and rattlesnake put their heads together. Whatever it was, it would be worth the price of admission.

Buttons, Sally, Ssserek, Sara, and Delph had their noses together only momentarily. Iggy grinned and waited.

Buttons sat before the rat and lifted one paw delicately. “You don’t seem to understand, old fellow. We will have the young mustang.” Her soft brown eyes glittered with humor. “After all,” she murmured almost to herself, “it is a horse for your kingdom.”

“And,” began the rat, “my precious little . . .” Suddenly, he snapped at Buttons’s nose.

“None of that,” warned Ssserek as he lowered his head for battle. He was quickly joined by the bobcat and peccary as they ranged alongside the serpent.

“Easy, you two,” spoke Buttons. “We must be more persuasive, our arguments more to the point, our position more unassailable. After all, this is the king of rats. We must treat him with the respect due.”

Ssserek grinned as he winked at the others behind him.

The two raccoon twins raised an eyebrow apiece, then grinned in return, and sat where they were. “You’re the boss,” they vowed.

Buttons motioned to Sara, who then approached the rat and carefully arranged herself before the rat of all rats. Sara smiled. And coughed delicately behind her small paw. And then she took a deep breath.

Her ribs lifted as her chest expanded. She lowered her head, as the watching crowd exhaled together, she puffed and blew.

Nothing happened. She looked at Buttons. Her eyes were round, and some doubt could be seen as she lowered her head apologetically to Ssserek and Buttons.

The great rat snickered, and the chittering behind grew in volume.

“Oh my,” said Sara. My pilot light is out.” She looked with dismay at the rat who preened as his tail whipped to and fro.

Sara turned to the rat imploringly. “You’re not afraid of fire, are you?” she asked innocently.

“I’m not afraid of anything,” King Rat snapped.

“Hey, no need. I can do it,” stated Iggy, boldly stepping forward as he searched his ragged tail.

“No need, my grungy little friend. This is Rat Island. I do the honors.”

“Now, hold on,” Iggy was adamant. His fur started to rise along the ridge of his back as he leaned forward. “I can do it.”



“Look, my scrawny little friend, move aside for your betters.” The old rat rose to his full height. He was indeed a fine looking rat, as such things go, with his black nose, large beady eyes, and silver fur. But his naked tail flicked angrily back and forth, belying his fine words. His anger was rising.

Iggy would have retorted in kind, but Buttons nudged her friend aside. “Please, Iggy. He really can do it.”

The rat’s lips curled as he sneered, “Yes, I can and should.” He stopped and looked at the little dragon who remained sitting.

The rat turned to Buttons. “What’s a little fire? I’m not afraid!” His glances flickered from one to the other of those before him.

“Excellent, most exalted of all rats.” Buttons turned to Iggy.” Let him have it.”

Iggy made a big show of unwillingness, but cut it short when Ssserek’s head began to drop. The small squirrel reached back to his tail and carefully removed a match, its red tip gleaming like the rat’s eyes. He bowed ever so slightly as he handed it to the large rat, and then scurried quickly to the rear, and remained there, peeping around Biff’s rotund figure from moment to moment.

The rat was nonplused. He held the match in the air, turning it one way and then another. He looked to Ssserek, then to Sally, and finally to Buttons, where his attention remained.

She smiled blithely. Stepping forward, she said, “All you do it, strike it against a rock.”

“I know! I know! Any dummy knows how to light a match!” King Rat hissed.

Buttons glanced around and waited as the raccoon twins carried a large, flat stone forward. They carefully placed it before the rat and quickly left.

Buttons nodded toward the rock. “Then, it’s quite simple. You hold it for Sara to breath on it. That will return her pilot light.”

The rat searched the faces of the creatures before him, but could detect no subterfuge. He next looked at the dragon who watched, her eyes large, luminous, and, yes, rather pleading.

The rat swelled with fast-growing pride. He could do it. Only he had the dexterity and skills required. This would show them. He looked at the stone before him.

Buttons looked up at Sara, who was engaged in monitoring her insides. First, she rolled her eyes to the right, dipped her head, and then rolled her eyes to the left as she measured the growing sensations. Then, she smiled broadly at the rat.

“I’m ready, whenever you are,” she crooned.

King Rat rose onto his hind legs, gazed carefully about, and then struck the match across the rock. Sparks flew, rats behind scattered, and then he held it high. The flame flickered brightly in the gathering dusk.

Buttons was watching closely, and then cautioned the rat. “Hold it down a little.”

He looked at her, and then his eyes brightened. Of course, the little dragon couldn’t comfortably reach it as he held it over his head. Beaming with pride, he lowered it until it was right before his nose. His long, grand whiskers twitched.

Sara nodded, and as Buttons and the others retreated, Sara let all of the accumulated gases within escape in a single huge burst.

Billowing flame and smoke engulfed the rat. So great was the blast that even the more daring of the rats behind were wrapped by the minor holocaust. There was much coughing and spluttering before the flames and smoke subsided.

King Rat stood there, and like Iggy before him, the match slowly crumbled to the ground. Gone were the whiskers, and much of the shiny gray fur. Gone was the pride. But not the anger, or the hatred, not the gnawing kind of hatred only rats can harbor.

King Rat raised one paw to his burned and scorched nose. He rubbed it as he discreetly coughed and surveyed the crowd before him. Yes, it must be admitted, there were some snickers at the back, but Buttons, Sara, Ssserek, and the others simply stood their ground, waiting. They had no smiles, and their features were grim.

No! There was one exception. The scrawny little squirrel was grinning broadly, thoroughly enjoying King Rat's plight. Iggy couldn't help it. He grinned even more broadly as he sidled up next to Sara. And then he moved before her, directly in front of the rat who watched with growing wrath.

The rat sighed. No, no, no. Nothing to do but admit it, but he was a rat and he had stood his ground, though his evil heart quailed within his breast. The dismay disappeared from his face, the hardness returning as he began to speak.

His tones were soft and low, apologetic. So soft and low that Iggy had to lean forward to hear. Precisely what the rat wished for.

Perhaps he could not win, but he could make at least one sorry. He could still hurt someone. And that someone was directly before him.

Only Ssserek and Buttons understood immediately what the evil rat intended, but only Ssserek had the speed required.

King Rat grinned evilly, and then, as though glancing to one side, he slashed at Iggy, faster than thought itself, meaning to take the small squirrel in the throat. Even faster was Ssserek's strike, brushing Iggy aside in a single quick motion. But not fast enough. Although King Rat had missed the throat, still he inflicted a mortal slash across Iggy's shoulder.

Blood rapidly welled from the ghastly wound, falling to the damp ground in a steady, life-taking flood.

King Rat smiled as he settled back to watch the effect of his action.

Buttons and friends were hunkering down, readying themselves for the attack, angry words beginning to flow from them almost as rapidly as blood from the squirrel.

Sara rose up, spreading her wing widely, preventing Buttons and Sally from an immediate attack. She alone faced the growing number of rats gathering behind their master and king. Her eyes blazed as she began to take a deep breath. What would have happened is not known, for the rats were numerous, and they were on their land.

Ssserek moved, sliding beneath the fanning wings, to take position before the angry young dragon. “Stop. There is no time for that, your highness. Stop and think.”

The young dragon shook her head. She wanted revenge. But then, she glanced down at her friend who had collapsed to the ground. His eyes were closed and his breathing was becoming more and more shallow.

She looked at Ssserek. Of course, he was right. First things first.

And to the bewilderment of the gathering rats and to everlasting wonder of her friends, she knelt beside Iggy and slowly began to lick his wound. She had wanted rats’ blood, but it was that of her friend, Iggy, she tasted. As she cleaned the wound, the flow of blood began to slow, then it became a trickle, then ceased altogether. Healing had begun, then rapidly progressed until only a scar remained.

Those behind cheered. Those in front shuttered.

Sara rose again to stand before King Rat. She coughed, a small jet of smoke and flame escaping from between her soft-appearing lips. She smiled and King Rat shuddered. Her pilot light was relit, and King Rat shriveled inside. This time, she knew how to control it. King Rat shriveled more. She smiled even more broadly as she lowered her head to place her nose scant inches from that of the rat.

As she began to take a deep breath, the many rats behind vanished, leaving their king alone to take the full fury of the young dragon.

He abruptly sat down, almost reeling off-balance. He caught himself, tried to hold himself upright. But it was no use. He openly shivered, frozen as he was by the glare of the dragon’s eyes, and those of Ssserek, and particularly those of that black dog.

“After due consideration.” Anything to forestall the dragon. He took a deep breath. An evil day indeed when rats met her. Oh, but for her. And now. *She!* He gazed once more into the eyes of the young dragon.

“I believe you will have no difficulty finding your way back.” Sighing, he turned to leave. Then, as though it were an afterthought, he nodded to their right. “You’ll find the mustang in a well-protected bower.”

This was no afterthought. “Please leave.” He sniffed. His nose almost touching the sand, he disappeared into the shadows, which were rapidly swallowing his kith and kin. For ever after, King Rat referred to Sara only as *she*, or when in a really nasty mood, *that creature*.

Buttons and her friends found the young mustang in a nearby bower. He was hungry and had little to drink. He was weak, and though he wobbled badly, he would accept no aid.

The rats were clever, using tussocks of grass and partially submerged trees—over which the way was fraught with difficulty for the colt—and islands beneath the dark waters. Once onto the trail, the sure-footed raccoons and otters cheerfully led the way, with Biff, the bear and the young moose standing on both sides of the colt. Iggy and Sara soared overhead, accompanied by clusters of hummingbirds, and flanked by grim hawks.

Iggy was happy just to hang on, having little strength left after his ordeal. If he were more subdued than normal, he had good reason.

Ssserek and Delph followed slowly behind, not trusting the rats. Perhaps they had given in this time, but they remained evil and untrustworthy, quick to change their minds once the immediate danger had passed. Sally continued to sniff the air. There was no sign of rats, and there would be none. This time.

The small band of animals reached Dead Rat Cove by sunset. It had been a long day, and the many friends departed after seeing the young mustang returned to its mother and herd. The stallions remained skittish, but grateful, in their own way. They thanked Sally and Buttons with great

courtesy, but shied from Ssserek, and stayed away from the water's edge where Delph cruised up and down, watching the proceedings. The mustangs looked with wonder at Sara, and there were many mutterings within the herd at the marvel of it all.

Sara was quite pleased with the affair and patted Iggy on the head repeatedly, much to his chagrin and the amusement of the others. The small dragon finally approached Buttons and Ssserek after the herd had left.

She simply said, "I must be going. Lost, you know."

Buttons and Sally and their closest friends gathered around the small dragon. The raccoon twins and the otter were openly fascinated by her magical healing of Iggy's near-fatal wound and repeatedly begged her to tell them more. But she bashfully demurred, saying only that dragons had many gifts unknown to the present world. Biff, the bear grunted in good humor as they relived the fateful day, he and the Saint Bernard sitting on one side as Sara sidestepped the many questions.

The dragon looked to Buttons for help, and finally, Buttons had to literally push her friends away. Sara sighed deeply. "You know how scared I was, Buttons, and yet . . ." She sighed again. "I didn't know I could do it until you showed me how. And now . . . Well, I'm lost, but I'll never be alone again."

Buttons had simply grinned. It had been a great day and she expressed the deep emotions of all and their love for the unique creature who had joined them, even for a short while.

"We'll miss you Sarandra," she said as she stood against the dragon's shoulder, small brown eyes meeting great luminous brown eyes. Then, Buttons had whispered something in her ear before dropping back to the ground. "And, that will take care of that problem."

What she had whispered was never revealed, but Sara's pleased smile warmed the hearts of all who were present.

Then, to keep her overwhelming feelings under control, Buttons had winked, and said, "Ya'll come back."

Iggy giggled, Biff guffawed, and Sally, glancing at Ssserek, simply shook her head, as they all joined in the laughter.

Sara was about to lift her wings for flight when she noticed Iggy shuffling his feet in the sand. She wanted to say something funny like Buttons had, but she couldn't. Never in her life had she met a creature quite like the irrepressible squirrel.

Iggy glanced up, suddenly seeing only Sara's large and beautiful eyes contemplating him. He would have run for the nearest tree but couldn't move. He wanted to race to her and tell how much she meant to him, what their flight together had meant, and how much . . . well, how much . . . his thoughts were in total disarray. He fidgeted and coughed, though his throat was very tight.

Sara moved forward slowly, never taking her eyes away from the small sad creature. She knelt before him, and then reached out to gently stroke his wounded shoulder. She wanted to say something, but even as intelligent and knowledgeable as she was, for one her age, she didn't know what to say.

Buttons and Sally watched the two with growing pain, and then they moved forward as one to stand on either side of Sara.

Buttons spoke clearly and crisply. "What she wants of you, you twit, is to take care of your wound. No fights with the raccoon twins for a while, no racing helter-skelter around trees where you don't belong. OK?"

At her no-nonsense words, Sara smiled, the pained look rapidly disappearing. "Exactly. No nonsense, Iggy. Do take care of yourself, or I'll never come back. Promise." Her heart was about to burst, but she stepped back, and assumed her most haughty stance. "You do understand? Right?"

Iggy grinned sheepishly, and then his unusual restraint vanished. He rushed forward and grasped the surprised and pleased dragon. Raising himself to his highest, he said, "I understand. Truly, I do. And, you will be back. I know." Only by holding tightly to the dragon could the small squirrel contain his shaking. Then, with one last gasp, he said, "I'll miss you Sara. Please hurry back."

Sara nodded, and then to the complete surprise of everyone there, she reached down, picked him up, and kissed him. She could only say “Bye” as she lifted her wings. Nodding with pleasure and love, she launched herself into the night sky.

Iggy looked at the dirt in front of him. It would never be the same again for him. He had flown, he had soared with the hawks and hummingbirds, and for a while, even a butterfly would be envied.

Buttons and her friends sat, clustered around Ssserek and Biff, the hawks perched on nearby limbs, and with the frog and gator circling in front, they watched the small dragon disappear into the darkness, small gouts of flame lighting her way.

Sally sighed, “I wonder if she’ll be able to keep her pilot light going.”

“Oh sure,” Iggy piped in, “I told her everything she needed to know. No problem. Really.” He had looked at them all, grinning mischievously. “Told her everything I knew.”

Biff groaned. “She’ll be back sure as shootin’.”

Buttons had laughed with Ssserek and Delph put paid to the day with a great resounding slap of his tail on the water as he and Milo, the moose had joined in.

Thus ended the visit of Princess Vintrix, Sarandra, Guardian of the High Reaches, and friend to the smallest and proudest little ground squirrel who would lay awake many a night wondering what sky she was crossing.

The End



# The Raven of Elderwood

Even his own kind, the ravens shunned him. But in Elderwood, his cunning and cruel nature were envied. Here, in a distant and dark corner of the Great Swamp, the rats of Elderwood had found someone they could appreciate and admire. His promise of vengeance and blood had fired their imaginations. As he hobbled about on a crooked leg now badly healed from an old injury, a small black dog had almost caught him on the ground feasting on a recent kill. They would circle him as he spoke, their red eyes bright with hidden thoughts of blood and feasting. They could snicker at his injuries in their own dens, but never in his presence. They could take joy in his broken wing which he now used as a poor substitute for a crutch, but never look at it directly, for he was fast with his hard beak, and he used it often. They listened closely for his mind was keen, and like the rats, crowded with evil thoughts which he loved to repeat as he moved restlessly along the shore of the swamp, gazing long and evilly into the distance where he knew the Great Forest lay.



Late into the nights, he and the rat leader would sit at the shoreline plotting just how they would gain surcease from the gnawing hatred which twisted their guts endlessly. They could only express their loathing in short evil words, spitting them out like bullets. On and on they would go, each taking turns repeating their hatred and how they would give anything to have her once again in their hands.

But how? How could they lure her to Elderwood where they could rip and tear her? What would bring the small black dog? Without her many friends. Yes. That was always the flaw in their evil plans. They could not

wreak havoc upon her small black body in the presence of the alligator, or that horrible Ssserek, he the largest of rattlesnakes, swift and deadly even when badly outnumbered. Yes, and there were others, like the bear or the moose. She must be lured here without them.

Day and night, the raven crutched along the shore on one wing, the other weaving circles in the air. Gaunt from hunger because Elderwood provided little sustenance, even for the rats who would eat anything, but filled with hatred, the raven moved restlessly, twisting his head from side to side, seeking something he could not see, peering into each black hole, each bramble bush. He groped with his hard beak each nook and cranny along the twisted and torn trunks of the many trees so badly damaged in the great tornado. Each day, he would go through the same routine, his body seeking what his mind could not find.

Then, one day, it finally happened. A scrawny blackbird appeared in the distant skies making his way to Elderwood to report. What power the raven had over the blackbird was not known, only that the blackbird would report each day what was occurring in the Great Forest and Field.

The blackbird was small for one of his kind, normally only slightly smaller than the raven himself. He had little of the intelligence of his kind and was always seeking favors from larger and wiser birds. None listened to his begging requests. He was widely known to be craven, a cowardly nodding little thief who lived alone in the forest. When seen, it was usually by squirrels and birds who noted his presence at the edge of several other creatures quietly speaking among themselves. Then, he would be sat upon and chased away. There seemed to be little danger in him, but nonetheless, no one trusted him. Too often an egg or other food would be stolen in the night. Watchfulness was the word when he was around.

He flew directly toward the raven who waited impatiently at the shore. Landing several feet from the raven, the small blackbird nodded repeatedly, hopping toward the raven cautiously, carefully taking note of the raven's temper.

His nose almost in the sand, the blackbird looked respectfully up at the raven. The blackbird had to twist his head so that he could view the raven with one eye. In turn, the raven had to twist his head to see well with his left eye for the right was partially opaque, and therefore, he was almost blind on that side. Anyone approaching from the right unexpectedly could expect an explosion of abuse, both verbal and physical.

He coughed carefully, before saying anything but “Good day, your greatness, good day.”

The raven sneered at the small bird who crouched before him. He despised the small creature, knowing him for the cowardly sneak that he was, but carefully refrained from making his thoughts too obvious. He needed to know what transpired within the forest, and only this creature could tell him.

When spoken, his words were soft as his beak was hard. “Well, my small one, what passes today in the forest? You have news, perhaps?”

The raven nodded slowly, giving the little sneak time to build his courage.

“Sir, sir,” said the blackbird. He then went on to describe in the most minute details the goings and comings of the many creatures in the forest.

The raven was fast becoming impatient for the news was the same. As yesterday, and the day before, and before that. The raven was suddenly jolted out of his reverie.

The small blackbird had continued to rattle off his many observations without a pause. “And the two are about . . .”

The raven cried aloud. “Caw, caw, caw,” he shouted to the sky, to the trees, and best of all, to King Rat who appeared rapidly at the obvious excitement of the raven. “Come, come my friends. I have it. I have it.”

Other rats peered out of the darkness of fallen trees. What could make the raven so excited? Others slowly crept onto the sand. They looked about, seeking any potential danger. There were none. Their eyes glittered as they

looked at one another. This would mean no good for someone. Red eyes gleamed even brightly at the evil thought.

King Rat was old and almost hairless. His whiskers had never fully recovered from his encounter with the little dragon. He often saw her in his dreams. They were never good dreams. He tolerated the raven because they were so similar in their thoughts and in their hatred for the little black dog. The rat would tolerate anything if it meant an opportunity to even the score. He moved slowly toward the raven who was leaping awkwardly about in his frenzy of cawing. Never had the rat heard the raven so excited.

As the two evil creatures met on the shore, the raven whirled around and around until it seemed he must fall. He leaped toward King Rat.

“I have it. I have it. I know how we can get the little dog here without the great snake or alligator knowing.”

King Rat bared his fangs, saliva dripping from his mouth in his rising excitement. He rose to a sitting position, more than matching the large raven in height.

The two stared fixedly at one another. Each knew the other's thoughts, the evil intent. The raven dropped his head, turning it so that he looked up at the large rat, much as the small blackbird reported.

Holding his head in that position, the raven hopped around and around the rat. Hop, hop, then several mincing small steps. Hop, he moved, sidling around and around.

“Hee, hee, hee. I'll have her here. With your aid, my fine rat of rats. Yes, together, we'll have her.”

He stopped abruptly, turning toward the small blackbird who had slowly moved closer to better hear. “Report their whereabouts tomorrow. Now, go. Do as you're told.”

The small blackbird tumbled backwards in his anxiety to be out of reach of the raven and rushed into the sky as the raven's beak narrowly missed a fluttering wing tip.

King Rat in turn glared at the nearest of minions, all of whom rushed back into the safety of the trees.

It took time, but finally their scheme was agreed on, and then they swiftly put into place each of the components. Only then did the two cease their restless movement up and down the shore as they reviewed each step which would bring about the capture of Buttons who was, at that moment, moving slowly through the Great Field.

Sally, the beagle was at her side as they moved toward their respective homes. Evening was approaching, and it had been a fun day. With Iggy, they had gone to the River Running to watch the otters play. Only they, of the many creatures of forest and field, had the freedom to approach and enter the village along the river where the dens of otters were to be found.

It was always the same. A tumultuous welcome and then playtime. First, with the youngest who rapidly lost interest or tired easily. Then, with Dodger, the otter, they would head for the slides and a good swim in the river.

Buttons would place herself at one side to better view the fun because she never swam unless Delph, the alligator was present. He wasn't present today, much to the relief of the otters. While they greatly appreciated his abilities in the water, they were more than wary of his great mouth and his endless appetite.

Finally, even the otters were exhausted from all of the fun. Buttons's ribs ached from all of the laughter and the delight of watching Iggy trying to ride on the back of Dodger. For all of his agility in the water, Dodger kept sliding from beneath Iggy who would fall with great vigor and much splashing into the water. His pretense at drowning was hilarious, and finally one of the younger otters would porpoise out and then beneath the floundering ground squirrel. Together, they would tear across the river to deliver the laughing and a very wet Iggy to Buttons who would then be thoroughly doused with water as Iggy shook himself.

Only later as the two dogs returned home did their thoughts turn to a more serious matter. They had met Ssserek earlier as they moved toward the

river. The great serpent greeted them with his usual good humor, but he was clearly on his way and would not tarry more than the moment it took to tell the two dogs. Word had come to him that a small serpent clan at the distant northern edge of the Great Field was in danger from a new construction company. He knew the field and forest were off-limits to construction, the Great Swamp and its surrounding forest and field were part of a greater wildlife preserve. Still, the small bird that brought the message insisted that the distant serpents required his presence. He would see himself.

Buttons and Sally both immediately agreed to go with him, but he refused their aid. This was a serpent matter, and besides, their presence at home was required. They had sighed at his refusal, but knew he would have it his way. Individual serpents they knew and loved, but in the matter of clan business, they recognized the strong ties that existed between one serpent and his clan. For Ssserek, all clans mattered. He was gone before either dog had had a good opportunity to question him further.

The next day, they were off to the swamp, romping freely along the swamp's edge looking for Delph, the alligator. He was always ready for fun and provided excellent transportation around the swamp. With him, there could be no danger, and many shy animals who would otherwise disappear instantly at the first sight of any stranger, or the alligator alone, waited to greet the two dogs. Then Buttons and Sally would have much fun in quizzing the many small creatures they would meet in a day's time.

But Delph was nowhere to be found. No tracks. Nothing. Only later in the day did a small blackbird swoop down to stand in front of them. Nodding his head up and down, he reassured that he meant no harm.

Both dogs laughed politely. One small blackbird could hardly prove any danger.

Buttons smiled as she asked, "And, what can we do for you, small friend?"

The blackbird nodded again and again, twisting his head to view them with one eye and then the other.

“Well, you see. I, uh, I saw you seeking something along the shore. When I thought of it, I recalled seeing you in the company of that creature . . . I mean . . . the alligator. He always seems to be with you.”

“Yes,” replied Sally. “We were seeking him. He’s a very good friend.”

The blackbird coughed gently as he watched the two. Such silly creatures. Surely, these two could hardly be what the magnificent, and terribly frightful, raven was after. After all, how could these two injure the raven, much less the rats. Well, he would say what he been told to say and be off to report.

“Well, you see, I saw the alligator swimming northward this morning. He seemed to be hurrying, so of course, I didn’t detain him. He said he would be back in several days since it is a long journey.”

“Darn,” blurted out Sally. “Bet he’s off to be with Ssserek.”

The small blackbird grinned to himself. Yes, they would believe anything. Such simpletons. He bobbed several more times and then begged to depart, which he promptly did before more questions could be asked.

“Yeah,” muttered Buttons. “Darn, he is right. Just wait until they get back. Oh, well. Let’s go see how the groundhogs are doing.”

“Good idea,” responded the beagle. “We haven’t been there in a long time.”

Both the young dogs had a good day and parted that afternoon earlier than usual because Buttons was due for her monthly grooming session at the local grooming parlor, one of her favorite places-. She never missed it, and early the next morning would be out rolling freely in the dirt and bush. Only when she was thoroughly covered would she sit up, grinning at the thought of her boy’s first words when she returned. Sally always went along with the gag. It was, after all, a good one.

Thus, it was on the following morning when Buttons was at her favorite spot for rolling and scratching her back. To and fro she wiggled, enjoying every moment. She had a care for nothing else. It felt so good.

“Hmmm . . . hmmm,” she hummed to herself. Finally she sat up and looked around. Strange. No Sally. She barked briefly, expecting an immediate answer from close by. No answer.

Buttons began to walk back and forth, casting about for any sign of her best friend. But there were no footprints. No odors in the morning breezes. Nothing.

She barked louder. She couldn’t bugle like Sally, and her voice would not carry very far. Well, she would go looking. With that thought, Buttons was off.

First, around the Great Field. That took time. Then, toward the river. More time. By noon, Buttons was tired and had to rest. It was very quiet. The breeze had stopped, and she would enter the forest quickly to take advantage of the cool shade. Having rested a short time, she was soon off, crossing the forest using their favorite paths. No sigh.

Buttons stopped for another brief rest. Strange. How very strange. It was not like Sally, who was punctuality itself. Buttons was the one usually guilty of forgetting meeting times. Easily, distraction went with her youth. But not with the serious Sally. An unusual feeling crawled slowly up her back.

Buttons quickly glanced about. Getting the shakes already. But something was wrong. She hurried on, more often glancing carefully around. Something was wrong. She could feel it. Dark shadows appeared in her mind, tumbling one after the other, scrambling for something to grab. But there was nothing to hold on to. Just dark shadows without substance.

She reached the swamp’s edge and glanced at both directions. None of her usual friends. Delph. She missed him most of all. Now, she needed him badly.

She sniffed the air. There was something there now. Very faint. And distant. She turned in that direction and was off, running with her quick, short strides that covered ground remarkably fast.



The odor was steadily growing stronger. But it was all wrong. Sally, but not Sally. Salty, too.

She rounded a small hummock of long grass. There it was. Very close now. She skidded to a stop, a ridge of hair involuntarily rising along her spine. She could see discoloration on the grass. And, there was a spotchy patch on the sand.

She moved forward, carefully examining her surroundings. No one there now. She put her nose to blotch on the sand. *Blood!* Blood! That's what was wrong. Sally, and yet, not Sally. Not as Buttons knew her.

But it was Sally's blood, all right. No doubt. Too much. She had to be in grave danger. Buttons stopped, backtracking slowly. On the leaves rising before her. Another's blood. Rat blood. "Rats," her brain shouted.

"Oh, you ninny. Of course, only they would attack Sally." She scanned the ground more closely. The prints were everywhere, now that she was using her brain. Maybe not many. But more than enough for the small beagle, no matter how she might have fought. Too quick for her to bugle or call out.

Well, they would have to deal with Buttons now. Buttons raised her head and scanned the far shore of the swamp only vaguely to be seen in the rising mists. There! There! She had to be there. Buttons could and would follow.

No Ssserek. No Delph. Well, she could do it on her own. The difficulty would be great, but she would go now. The blood made the situation much more immediate and far more dangerous. So be it.

Buttons turned, and, putting her nose down so she could more easily follow the trail, left the scene of the battle which had put Sally in the clutches of the rats.

She could not move as swiftly as she would have liked, but it was sure this way. She made steady headway, glancing at the small peninsula that jutted out into the swamp. Yes. Probably there, and from there, trees and tussocks of grass. She would make it.

She did not hear them approaching, but two figures suddenly appeared out of nowhere and were immediately at her sides. She stopped and whirled to meet the newest danger.

Buttons grunted and sat. “Oh, it’s you two.”

Toby, the bobcat grinned at her apparent annoyance and butted Cross-eye, the tomcat who stood next to him. Cross-eye sidled up to Buttons and rubbed against her shoulder.

“Oorrrrh,” was his best purr, a rough, grumbling sound with which he irritated Buttons no end.

“Oh, cut it out you two knot heads. Just what are you up to now?” She stood and shoved Cross-eye away.

Although she had helped to raise him, he brought back dark memories which she did not like to remember. But, they loved one another in their own way, though neither would ever admit it.

Cross-eye had grown into a fine and large tomcat who found a natural ally in the bobcat with whom he roamed the forest and field at all hours of the day or night.

The males grinned at one another as Toby answered. “We met Ssserek on his way north. He was angry but calmed when he saw us. He looked us over, only as he can, and then said, ‘You two will find Buttons and go wherever she goes. Understood?’”

“Well, he just up and left us standing there. No explanations or anything else.”

Cross-eye added, “And just what are you doing?” He grinned even more widely because he knew that splutter and carry on as she might, she would not say no to their presence.

“Well, come on, twits!”



She turned and was off and running, her nose close to the ground. She did not hesitate when the pencil of a peninsula appeared before them. She turned and raced out along its irregular surface, studded as it was with hummocks of grass, brush, small broken trees, and other impediments. The two cats easily matched her best stride and simply went over what she had to maneuver around.

The scent of fresh blood was in Buttons's nose. It was Sally's. Plenty had been spilled, as was obvious to both cats who frowned more and more as they progressed.

They quickly reached the end of the small peninsula, and Buttons rested for a moment as she contemplated the difficulties which lay ahead. Just how she could spot small, partially or completely submerged dangers, she didn't know.

Just then, from overhead came a loud and crackling "Caw, caw, caw. Wait. Buttons. Hold up."

All three looked up in time to see a very large crow settling to a limb of an old dead tree. It was JW—J. Wellington Blackbird, that is. He was a large and very officious bird who was raucous at his best, speaking in loud and harsh tones. This time it was different as he glanced about and closely peered at the two cats. On more than one occasion, only his great vigilance had saved feathers from their sharp caresses. Now, he spoke in quiet tones.

"Careful, Buttons. Neither of the cats can see what I can from the air. Haste is necessary, but we must be wary. Very careful; they do awful things to Sally."

Buttons shuddered as she remembered the rats and their cruelty.

Cross-eye spoke up. "OK, JW. Just what do we have to do? And relax. You've nothing to fear from us. Right?" He looked carefully at Toby, whose eyes had narrowed, only the slits of his yellow pupils shining.

"Not to worry, JW But tell us. What's going on? That the rats have Sally, we already know. And it's all too obvious the blood-letting is a trap."

"And so it is," JW responded. "They had a very neat trap, several of the largest simply smashing her into the sand as they slashed her hide. Then away. The same path you're on now."

"And just how do you know all of this?," Buttons queried.

"A little bird told me. A very little blackbird. The same who sent Ssserek and Delph on their mission north." He spoke harshly as he recalled the questioning of the rats' small tattletale.

"Does Ssserek know? Or Delph?" Buttons spoke anxiously now. Their mission was terribly laden with danger without them.

JW replied, "I have sent for them. But even if they know now, they couldn't reach us in time."

Both cats groaned inwardly. Like Buttons, they knew what lay ahead now. It would be dangerous, indeed, at the very best.

"Not to fear, there's always hope and others." JW spoke in his boldest and harshest tones. He took to the air before further questions could be asked.

Buttons frowned, thinking deeply to herself. Fortunate for them that the large blackbird had seen what he had and acted as he did. Maybe Ssserek and Delph would make it, maybe not. She moved forward without hesitation. So it would be.

Toby frowned as he followed. The water held no terror for him.

Cross-eye followed the bobcat readily. He could swim when he had to, and together they could take care of Buttons. But as he moved forward

behind Toby, he couldn't help but think. "But, just what did he mean, 'and others'?"

As they moved across tussocks of grass, small islands just the water's surface, and fallen trees, each struggled with their own thoughts. An attack must come. But where? When? How many rats?

Buttons had to fight not only the difficult passage, but her fear for her close friends who climbed and swam beside her, and particularly for Sally who was now certainly being tormented by the vicious rats. They could take infinite time in their tortures, and certainly would be waiting for Buttons's arrival.

She started to sigh, but swallowed warm swamp water, and in it the sweet taste of Sally. She coughed and hacked wretchedly as she fought to clear her mouth and throat.

Toby closed beside her. "Easy, Buttons, old girl. We'll get you there in fine shape."

Buttons glared at him as he winked broadly at her. "Sure you will, old buddy, but what shape will we leave in?"

"Not to worry, Buttons, mom. You couldn't possibly look any worse than you do now."

Buttons would have taken a bite out of the cross-eyed cat could she have reached him. But, indeed, he was at least partially right. She was thoroughly soaked. To her once fine coat clung burrs and bugs of various colors. Grass and long leaves clung to her, trailing behind and leaving a trail of mud which clouded the water.

Ahead, JW urged them on in soft tones as he weaved side to side, seeking the hidden trail. Sighting a submerged log, or island of grass, he would dip and hover over it until the three arrived, then on again, peering, dipping, seeking. Now and again, he would rise above tree level and look intently toward their goal. No signs of them yet. But when? He, too, fretted, something a blackbird seldom did.

The stench of the swamp filled Buttons's nose. It was becoming worse as they advanced. Just the odor alone would be enough now. She dripped muck and bugs as her sides heaved while they rested atop the roots of a long, dead tree. Even Cross-eye and Toby were beginning to show their weariness. Making sure Buttons had sure footing was difficult for the two cats, and the strength and stamina it required was indeed great. Almost too much, but they would never admit it.

Deep in thought, the raven smiled to himself as he moved awkwardly along the shore. Indeed, the trail was long and difficult. Upon that rested much of his plan. Surely, the little black dog would come with friends. It would be so much easier if they were very tired after their long journey.

JW sailed into sight. Cawing with relief he shouted, "Just ahead. Elderwood. Be careful. The rats are evil, the raven even more so. He is the cleverest of the bad lot."

Toby grinned, white fangs gleaming through a face covered with mud and the floating debris of the swamp. "Not to worry, old fellow. We know how to deal with such as them."

JW would have huffed and fluffed his feathers but knew better. The two cats would need all of the courage they could muster. He sailed on ahead, worry fogging his mind. The danger was great, and something was wrong. Something terrible was wrong, but he put no word to it.

The three moved cautiously forward. A shelf of soft muck and rock greeted them and they moved on more easily. Several dead logs rose out of the increasingly firm footing. Smaller stumps stood like sentinels before the logs. They were known as the fangs of Elderwood, and like the needle-sharp fangs of rats, they barred easy access to the nearest firm land.

Toby and Cross-eye moved easily along the fangs, seeking an avenue through them. Buttons yelped softly as she wallowed along the row of teeth. "Over here, you two. Here's a place."

The opening stood near the large logs which jutted out like leaning pylons, funneling all traffic toward the single opening. Buttons moved

through before either cat could say anything. Toby surged forward, his throat suddenly very tight as the small figure of Buttons disappeared from view. Cross-eye was not far behind when the cry of Buttons came to their ears.

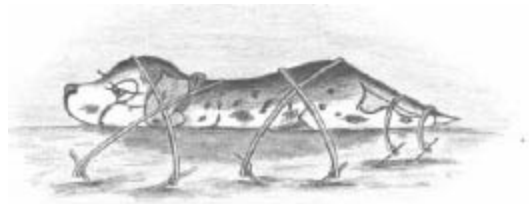
Both swam rather than plow through the muddy bottom. Sounds of battle were clear. Both cats had their ears laid back along their heads, their eyes seeking out the enemy. As they emerged into the small lagoon behind the fangs, rats could be seen diving from the large logs which lay around, swimming in small clusters toward Buttons and the three large rats who were engaging her from several directions.

Buttons had already dispatched one rat, to the amazement of the other attackers. Even in the water which hindered her movements, she had immediately attacked. The first to reach her paid the price of pride. She had surged out of the water to come down on top. Grabbing him by the neck, she had shaken him once and tossed him aside, neck broken, as she turned to face the others.

Toby was a bit faster than Cross-eye, and struck the attacking rats from the side. His broad paws gripped the water easily, and his claws were lethal with each stroke. Cross-eye, in his anger, simply grabbed flank, shoulder, side. He cared not one bit. The result was the same, a squalling rat who soon floated among his other dead companions.

As fast as the attack had come, it was over as quickly.

The three stood on the firmer ground of the lagoon. No live rat was to be seen. The logs lay about, but no enemy stood upon them. Nothing was visible on the shore. No! There was something, a dark mound.



Shaking involuntarily, Buttons moved quickly ahead, ignoring the warning hiss of Cross-eye. Toby backed carefully toward the shore, ever keeping his eyes on the logs and the fangs behind them. Each had sustained bites, and small ragged lines of blood followed them in.

Buttons cried out as she rose from the water. The dark figure had to be Sally, but something dreadful was wrong. The small Scottie hastened forward to be with her best friend.

The two cats shivered also. Nothing to be seen, no sounds. Yes, that was it. Nothing was to be heard. Even the wind had ceased.

Buttons rapidly approached her best friend and stumbled as she viewed the terrible scene before her.

Sally lay on her side. Instead of brown and black mixed with white, there was only blood, trickling in many small streams from many rips and fang marks to clot in the sand, forming a black ring of approaching death around her. She was pinned to the ground by many pieces of rope to stakes driven into the sand. They criss-crossed her body in an obscene pattern. Only a torn ear moved.

As Buttons moaned deeply in her throat at her friend's plight, an eyelid fluttered and a blood-filled eye opened, wandering, trying to seek the source of the moan.



A croaking sound came from Sally. But more she could not do. She was too weak to move. Her limbs pinioned as they were could do nothing. Each toe had been wrapped individually, increasing the pain if she tried to move.

Buttons howled in anger. She rose on her toes and shouted her defiance at the dark and torn trees of Elderwood.

Sally was dying even as Buttons stood there. She could not free Sally in time to do anything. A terrible resolve covered her mind like a soggy blanket. She could not think. She just wanted to kill. Rats. And more rats. And more.

Toby and Cross-eye had quickly come to Buttons's side. But as they stood beside her facing the shadows of Elderwood, JW's cry was heard. Neither moved, fixed like marble statues. They waited and listened.

JW cawed loudly from a perch high on an old tree standing starkly and alone at the edge of the swamp. "More come. Beware."

He fanned his wings and swept down on a group of fallen trees. From the deep darkness beneath it, a large cluster of rats issued forth, their eyes glittering with hatred and blood lust. They moved carefully, circling to the cats' right. JW cried out as he swept toward another fallen cluster of trees.

As he did so, the raven swept awkwardly down from a perch unseen. His flight was erratic, and JW did not see the coming attack, but Buttons did. She rose on her rear legs and yipped a short call. JW wheeled aside as the raven crashed into him.

Screaming hatred on all animal-kind, the raven struck as hard as he could. It was too late. JW's sharp turn avoided the full impact, but both birds struggled as they locked claws and pecked at one another. Their fall brought them crashing to the ground. The raven shrieked in anger and pain as his bad leg once again crumpled under him.

JW struggled to his feet as several rats rushed him, only to be met head-on by a furious small black dog who literally threw herself into them, allowing JW to rise swiftly above the battle. He would be short work for anyone of the rats.



Buttons had her mouth full as she snapped and slashed at the rats who had become utterly confused by her sudden and swift onslaught. Still, they did great damage as they were dispatched one by one.

Cross-eye and Toby, too, were meeting the cluster of large rats who had fanned out and attacked from several sides at the same time. But the rats underrated their opponents. With the small dog they had a chance. But these were felines, fighting mad felines who knew their opponent and took joy in the slaughter they reeked upon the rats. Toby slashed right and left as was his style, tearing life from the braver and more foolish who dared come within reach of his lethal claws. Cross-eye fought as he always did, leaping right and left, then in and out. His fangs found their mark, and each time, a rat died. His face was splattered with blood, some of it his own, several rats having bitten him as they died.

With the last of the group of rats dead, they both breathed rapidly and deeply. It had been difficult, but they looked for Buttons who sat among a smaller cluster of rats, the last in the throes of breathing his last. She, too, was panting hard, taking deep gulps of badly needed air.

The two cats rapidly closed around her, just in time as another group of rats slowly stepped from beneath a log leaning against another. They formed a larger bunch and approached slowly, grinning and nudging one another. Then, they separated and rushed in smaller groups of two and three with seconds between each attack.

A shrill whistle coordinated the attacks, which brought great distress upon their enemies who could only meet one small group before having to turn and face another. As the last rat fell, Cross-eye, too, fell to one side, his right rear leg having been bitten badly. His blunt features were masked in clotted blood. Buttons simply sat, panting in harsh, sharp intakes of breath. Her sides heaved with the severe exertion. Toby stood, blood slowly dribbling from a torn ear. If he fell, it would be the last of them, for his stamina was the greatest of all.

Buttons faced toward the direction from which the whistle had come. She stepped forward, a grin slowly forming as she glared with hatred on King Rat as he stepped into full view for the first time.

King Rat twirled a stubby whisker as he mockingly bowed. He spoke softly, "Welcome, my young friend. It is well you brought support, inadequate though it is. My fellows need their exercise."

Buttons coughed briefly and blew blood from her lips. "Rats," was all she said, much to the joy of Toby and Cross-eye.

Toby couldn't help join the repartee, grim as it was. "We, too, seemed to have need of the exercise. Cross-eye is breathing a bit harder than usual. "Fine fellows, yours."

Cross-eye's words were as blunt as his snout. "Well, my short-whiskered friend, they at least died well. Will you do the same?"

King Rat was not to be outdone. He watched as the raven joined him. "Our friend dog suffered overly long, or your attack would have been more successful. Remember that when you," he nodded to the raven, "peck her eyes out."

The raven glared and then peered sideways. Another group of rats were approaching from the far left, matching the strides of another group who approached from the right.

The raven spoke directly to the three before him. "Well, let us see how bravely you speak in a few moments. We'll see if you can die as slowly as

the small beagle yonder. She fought bravely also. To no avail, as you will come to witness for yourselves.”

Toby looked about, and his voice shook slightly as he whispered, “I believe we face death as yon bird-brain states.”

And then, to the cats’ amazement, Buttons simply wheeled and returned to sit in front of her two feline champions. She began to lick a bloody paw, totally ignoring the raven and Rat King who looked on incredulously.

Raven glared at King Rat. “What is she up to? You know her better than I do.”

Rat King was about to answer. But he repressed the dark thoughts which were assailing his mind. “No, no,” he thought. “Not again, never again.”

Instead, he shrieked in bursting anger, his eyes almost popping from his furious features. “Attack! Attack! But do not kill them. We will have them thrust up like the other. Attack, I say.”

This time, the battle was brief and furious. Soon, Buttons and the two felines were sitting in utter exhaustion. Even the rats, many of whom still lived, had backed off, forming small clusters of equally tired rats. With heads down, their eyes still glittered with anger and hatred.

The shrill voice of King Rat was to be heard in the background, exhorting his minions on. “Attack, I say. Soon, they will be ours to do with as we wish.”

The raven hopped up and down awkwardly, his harsh voice sounding above even the high-pitched tones of King Rat. “I told you we could do it. See! I told you. She’s ours now. Nothing can interfere.” He cawed loudly and repeatedly, his voice carrying across the swamp.

Carrying to several figures who approached as swiftly as their limbs could carry them. Two by air, two by water.

Buttons began to wash her paw again, abruptly stopping the exhortations of King Rat and the raven. King Rat looked about. He scanned the swamp, peered long at the sky. No. Nothing to be seen. As he dipped his

head to better view the small dog, she raised her head. Slowly, very slowly she winked.

Turning to her companions who sat, exhausted beyond belief, she smiled through her bloodied features. "Come," she said. "Tired, yes, but now it's time for us to attack."

Cross-eye looked at Toby who could only stare back at his feline friend. Toby could only shrug as Cross-eye went on, "She's crazy, but she'll have her way, one way or the other. Come on, friend, Toby. We can only die."

Cross-eye slowly raised himself on three legs, and slowly dragging his right hind leg, he staggered after Buttons who had gone to stand before Sally.

Toby sighed. "Just too bloody much."

Cross-eye looked back and grinned. Whether the bobcat meant the day or the Scottie wasn't clear. But did it matter?

Buttons stood over the barely conscious beagle. Congealed blood was all around. The blood that could run, ran more slowly. Well, they would go together. The small Scottie whirled, and stepped forward, moving between Cross-eye and Toby.

The rats were beginning to group together, forming three large masses. From their attack, no one would emerge alive. Nothing King Rat said made any difference. This time they would do it the old way. Bloody and slowly, limb by limb. Grim satisfaction to those who lived, no honor to those who died. That was the rat way of killing. They moved to meet the advancing small black dog.

Then, it happened. A tiny shrill voice came from afar. King Rat and raven were frozen in their steps as they scanned the sky together, fear gripping evil hearts that suddenly pumped with an uncontrollable urge to run.

They did so, rapidly and with no thought for their fellows, as a brown figure appeared over the trees, steeply turning in a heart-wrenching second.

It was the dragon. There could be no doubt of that. The figure of Iggy clung to her neck as before, one small fist raised in defiance.

As the small dragon passed beneath a limb of a dead cottonwood tree, Iggy leaped to a large branch, racing along it to better view the havoc as Sara blew great clouds of flame and smoke down upon the milling crowd of rats.

Buttons could do no more, sinking in quiet relief to the sand beside Sally. Toby and the hobbling Cross-eye could and did, attacking with new vigor any rat who fled from beneath the flames. A scorched spot or two made no difference. This was their time.

Sara banked and turned flaming again and again until only a few rats remained. Quickly, she settled to the bloodied sand and rapidly approached Buttons, who rose, one limb at a time, to greet her great friend, Sarandra, Princess of the High Reaches.

“Sara, Sara,” was all she could say as she looked anxiously at Sally whom Sara was quickly examining.

Sara’s eyes were wide with wonder and fear. “Buttons, please, you must understand. I may be too late. I will do what must be done. You finish here.”

With those few words, the small dragon quickly snipped the many lines that crossed the bloody body of the beagle. Sara then gently took Sally into her arms and, spreading her wings, quickly mounted into the sky. Buttons could only sit one more time, watching Sara until she disappeared into vault of blue above her.



The heroic measures of the young dragon could not be witnessed by those fighting on the sand below. Sally was only partially conscious, pain filling every muscle and nerve ending. The rats had worked slowly once they had the beagle pinned to the sand. A nip here, a tear there, whispers everywhere. It had been terrifying, and she could only struggle, but to no avail. They had sat back to watch her slowly bleed to death and await her friends in keen anticipation. But of these things she couldn't think. Too much pain, even in the kind and gentle hands of Sara.

Sara rose higher and higher in the air as she held the beagle closely, but as she mounted the azure blue of the afternoon's sky, she could feel Sally beginning to shiver. But it had to be done. The rips and tears of Sally's skin were too terrible even for the healing cleansing of Sara's tongue. Somehow, the dragon must first slow the terrible bleeding, and then take on each wound individually.

Higher, the dragon climbed. Sally bled, but more and more slowly as the cold became more and more bitter, biting at the ragged wounds like so many sharp shards of ice. Sara knew it would be close. Could Sally hang onto life a few moments longer, or must she succumb to both the cold and the many wounds?

Sara began to lick one small wound after another as she climbed steadily into the sky. Geese can sail many thousands of feet into the sky on their long treks in the fall and spring, even an eagle would not tempt such heights without good cause. Sara's limit was unknown. It did not matter for

she would die before giving up. She never ceased in her cleansing of the many wounds as her wings beat steadily, lifting her and her burden upward.

As Sally shivered and suffered, her blood began to congeal. The flow slowed and then ceased. Only then did Sara began to cleanse the larger wounds as she leveled off and began to slowly wheel and turn, her concentration solely upon the small dog which she held gently but firmly to her warm dragon's body.

Sally's healing did not occur rapidly, but it came. Only then did the dragon turned to look groundward. Her vision was extraordinary as were all her senses. As she scanned the distant earth, she knew matters had progressed rapidly. But to what end, she could not tell.

Sara, sovereign of the High Reaches, wanted desperately to join her friends on the beach, but knew she could not. Turning away, she wheeled and head west. Holding Sally in crook of her left arm, she swiped at something in her right eye. She snorted. Too old for such things. She hurried on. Sally had be to perfectly safe first, and then the young dragon would join Buttons and her protectors. To save or avenge, Sara did not know. But she would be there in time?

As Toby and Cross-eye attacked the lone survivors among the rats, the shrill voice of Iggy could be heard urging them on. Back and forth he bounced, danced, and weaved his way in leaps and turns, his joy at seeing his friends alive almost too much.

"Enjoy it while you can, my small one," came a soft, loathing voice. "You will not live much longer."

Iggy jumped a good three feet toward the end of the limb as he whirled to face the hated voice. It was a rat, neither large nor too small. One that was able to climb trees with his clever paws. The rat was smiling as he inched forward, his eyes never leaving the face of Iggy who was rapidly scanning his surroundings.

No. No other limb close enough to be reached even with his best leap. He and Sara had forgotten to consider this possibility as they approached



Elderwood. Well, Iggy could solve it.

And, he did. He slowly backed up. Back and back. Each step taken slowly, carefully, his paws reaching for the limb beneath him. Soon, there was scarcely limb enough to grip. At that point, he stopped. He looked the rat directly in the face.

“Well, friend rat. We’re at rope’s, uh, make that limb’s end.”

The rat stopped scant inches from the small ground squirrel. “So? What do you do now?” He grinned wickedly, good humor getting the best of his evil mind.

Iggy grinned in return. “This, my short-lived friend. If I go, we go together.”

With that Iggy bent and leaped into the air as high as he could. Up and then down, cleanly landing on the whipping branch. It bent, down, and down, until with a loud snap, it broke. Just behind the rat who shrieked as his footing disappeared from beneath him. Down and down they went, two small figures tumbling over and over as they fell.

The rat landed with a solid thud on a long, dead, and very hard tree trunk. Not even a second later, Iggy landed. But not with a solid thud of flesh on wood, but flesh on flesh.

Iggy leaped to his feet in complete surprise. Turning, he found himself facing an angry and very sore King Rat who was slowly rising. His back ached abominably. He glared at the small squirrel.

The insouciant Iggy was not one to be beaten in a verbal punch. “Well, if it isn’t old friend, King Rat. You look terrible.” Iggy stepped forward to better examine the surprised rat. “Hmmm, even your whiskers look awful. Burnt, I’d say. Simply stubs of their former grandeur, wouldn’t you say?”

King Rat could only splutter. Words were not enough. A shriek rose to his lips, and then he pounced. Forgotten was escape. Forgotten were the dogs. Gone were even the felines whose caterwauling could be heard

throughout Elderwood. Their voices ceased even as King Rat landed on the spot Iggy once occupied.

Then it became a race. Iggy's deft gymnastics among the fallen trees and the scrambling shrieks of King Rat who could only see the rump of the little beast who had brought the disastrous flaming of his grand whiskers down upon the unsuspecting Rat King.

As King Rat raced, awkwardly albeit, after Iggy, Buttons rose instantly from her reverie and raced toward the deep and forbidding portions of the dead and dying Elderwood.

Iggy was enjoying himself. No rat could catch him in this place. Too many limbs, too many logs to leap and race about. This was a game he and Buttons often played. Then, as he leaped for another log, it happened. He slipped, falling heavily to the earth below. He quickly rolled over for the rat would be upon him. It was too late.

King Rat stood at Iggy's feet. His eyes glittered with hatred, the lust of killing this small creature clouded his mind. Then, as Iggy half-sat up and smiled, King Rat fearfully glanced around. It was too late. A small black figure hit him solidly in the side. The rat felt sharp teeth around his neck, and then he remembered nothing, ever more.

Iggy clambered to his feet. "Wow, took you long enough. Thought you'd never make it."

He ducked as Toby's broad paw appeared out of the dark shadows. Iggy bounced quickly to the top of the nearest log. "Hey, easy, pussycat. You might have struck me."

As Toby settled for a leap, Iggy rapidly turned, only to find himself face to face with Cross-eye, whose eyes were clearly the most disconcerting set of eyes in the forest and field.

"Uh, good day, Cross-eye. You wouldn't mind, perhaps, if we discussed this further. After all, Buttons here . . ." he turned to glance down at his friend who was slowly sagging to the ground, "uh well, she appears somewhat frayed around the edges."

Cross-eye and Toby quickly forgot the small squirrel in their fear for Buttons. She was indeed beginning to wilt. Exhaustion, fear for Sally . . .

All three with one thought turned and made for the swamp's shore. What had happened? Sara had disappeared so fast. And then there was the fight to finish. Buttons had done what she had always done when she heard Iggy's voice as he fell. She knew what he would do. But, Sara? What had happened there?

As the three moved through the sand, Delph suddenly emerged from the swamp, a living torpedo of death roaring challenge upon challenge upon the inhabitants of Elderwood. He skidded to a halt as he viewed the three, with Iggy lagging behind. At least Iggy was glad to see him because as Delph burst into view, the small squirrel immediately raced for him, taking refuge between the eye knobs of the alligator who was pleased by the greeting.

Toby and Buttons could only glance at one another and shrug. Cross-eye grinned. His pleasure was real for he loved the irrepressible squirrel in his own way. Iggy had always been with him when he was a kitten. For that, the cat would even take on his best friend, Toby. Both knew it would never be necessary.

Buttons grunted once again. The others turned to see who was approaching now. Ssserek moved into view and slithered up the sand more leisurely. He was saddened by what he saw, but he never mentioned his fears for each of them, or the many doubts that had assailed his mind as he moved north. Clearly, the two felines had managed. Best of all, the squirrel, that tiny morsel of a squirrel, that maddening creature, that . . . somehow, he had done the impossible, reaching Sara, the smallest of dragons and friend to them all.

The rattlesnake smiled broadly. Only those who truly knew him could face that smile and actually greet the snake with genuine warmth in their voices.

Iggy leaped from Delph's shoulders and raced to face Ssserek. "Wow, Ssserek, you should have seen it. The greatest battle I've ever seen. These

guys were fantastic.” Then, his head dropped. “But, I . . . I don’t know about Sally. Sara took her up until . . . until even I couldn’t see her.”

Buttons simply sat and watched, never taking her eyes from the snake’s face. With his appearance, doubt and fears had disappeared. Still, she couldn’t completely dissipate the gnawing she felt deep in her body.

“Then listen my young friends. Listen well.”

He looked down on the small black dog as Delph approached, laying his head so that his nose just touched Buttons’s hind quarters. Iggy and the other two gathered about. Even JW, whose presence had been ignored throughout the fight, settled to the sand, his eyes wide with amazement. Of the relationship between snake and dog, he, like every inhabitant of the forest, knew, but never believed. From that time on, he would speak of it with wonder, and, for a crow, in soft tones.

“Delph and I met less than half of the way to our northern destination. We naturally compared notes, and as you will have guessed, the raven’s small minion of a cowardly blackbird had told us similar but differing tales. They did indeed got our attention, but we embarked reluctantly. Only slightly later, one of J. Wellington Crow’s friends caught us and told us the real truth.”

JW smiled and nodded with great pleasure, but could only nod his agreement. “Harumph,” he whispered. “Throat’s sore from yelling alarms! You do see?” He gazed down upon Buttons who smiled happily.

She rose slowly, her muscles aching badly from the fighting. She approached the large crow who slowly backed away, his eyes wide with amazement as Buttons stopped before him. Rising to a sitting position, she simply licked his beak once and returned to her friends. She smiled once again, with all of her companions joining in. “I understand, JW. We understand.”

The two felines would have joined JW, but Ssserek grunted. The two stopped immediately. As they looked at Ssserek, they both realized that JW had, indeed, almost more than he could tolerate. The excitement of the

battle, Buttons, the bleeding and dying Sally, Sara, a dragon of all things, and two creatures such as Cross-eye and Toby, whose fights and roaming mischief within the Great Forest were already legendary at their young ages. No! Those two he would best keep at a great distance.

Instead, Toby and Cross-eye simply nodded. “Our many thanks, great crow. You have done us, and Buttons, a great service this day. Many thanks.”

As for JW, this was something indeed to crow over for many a year. And, to the dismay of his many friends, he did indeed do just that.

Ssserek had waited patiently as Buttons and the cats showed their appreciation. It was only fit that they do so. Delph was not so sure. Besides, he wanted to hear all of the story. He grumbled mightily, nudging Iggy who happened to be leaning against his snout into a rolling ball of mud, muck, and leaves.

Iggy leaped to his feet when Ssserek suddenly dropped his head to be on eyelevel with Iggy. Ssserek smiled, as Iggy shuddered, “Well, you see, we immediately realized the significance of what the small blackbird had reported and returned as quickly as we could. You, Iggy, can tell us what happened next. Right?”

Looking Ssserek directly in the eye at close range was not what Iggy would have preferred. He could only stutter. “Well, well, you see. Ah, gee whiz, Ssserek. You know, I don’t know how I did it. When I really need her, she’s simply there. You had a word for it. But, well, but . . . I can’t remember things like that.”

Iggy rapidly backed away so that he stood far enough back to see all of the great snake. That was close enough.

Ssserek smiled and was about to speak when Buttons looked up in quick anticipation. She yipped as she began to wiggle, hope and fear chasing one another across her face.

Cross-eye nudged Toby who had had little experience with the smallest dragon. Iggy had told Cross-eye repeated tales about the dragon. Well, he

could wait.

Buttons was standing straight and square as the small dragon leveled out above the swamp and drifted into a neat landing pattern. But she was watching for Iggy who had raced down to the water's edge. Just in time to see one of Sara's wings catch itself upon a tall clump of brush.

"Whoops," she yelped in surprise as she somersaulted into a splashing heap of soft brown fur tangled in weed and old broken tree limbs.

Iggy shrieked as he raced into the water, only to disappear beneath the surface of the swamp.

Toby took two quick bounds and was in the water, reaching beneath the surface as Iggy emerged atop Sara's nicely rounded skull, her small ears deceptively laid back along her head.

Toby's nose almost met Sara's directly on as he, too, rose from the water, decaying rotting vegetation hanging from his nose.

Sara could only giggle as she nodded in agreement, almost sending Iggy once again into the swamp.

"And, you must be Toby. Nice to meet you. Iggy has such tales to tell about you two. I'm most honored."

Toby could only mutter as Sara rose slowly from the swamp, Iggy's arms tightly clamped about her neck. She was impressive, even disheveled as she was. The young bobcat backed slowly up the beach, never taking his eyes from the form of Sara whose bright eyes and smile had totally captivated him.

Toby was even more impressed as Ssserek and Delph approached and slowly bowed.

"Good evening, Princess Sarandra. Once again, you have come to our rescue."

Delph pushed forward. Like the others, he loved the young princess. But he was, after all, an alligator. In this case, he spoke for all.

“Princess.” His voice was filled with worry and deep anxiety. He knew both Buttons and Sally so well.

Sara placed one soft paw on Delph’s head. “Not to worry, great friend to our Buttons and Sally. Our beagle recovers slowly, but will do well.”

She looked around. “Indeed, we need to be underway if we are to return before sunset.”

She beckoned to Cross-eye, “Come, my feline friend. You fight like a bobcat, almost.”

Cross-eye smiled and grinned at his close friend. He displayed the claws upon his right paw. Wide for a tomcat, they in no way matched his friend’s. “Well, if I chew his down a bit, I might make it.” He grinned once again.

Cross-eye approached Sara as Toby was about to respond. Turning, he said to Toby, “Well, friend, you can hold on to me. Come on.”

With that and a supple leap, he sat upon Sara’s shoulders, just behind Iggy, who was grinning hugely, enjoying the scene as he did.

Toby began to back away, but found himself leaning against Ssserek who raised one eyebrow.

“Uh, guess you’re right,” he grinned as he quickly regained some composure. He was soon beside Cross-eye, and the two felines hugged Sara as best they could for they quickly found out that however sharp their claws, they could barely get a grip on her soft fur.

Cross-eye winked as they took flight. He had known. Nonetheless, like Toby, his stomach took off as they rose almost too quickly and could not meet Toby’s sickish grin for several moments.

Ssserek heaved a sigh of relief. With the two cats and Iggy out of the way, it was only necessary to have Buttons mount behind Delph’s eye knobs, and they were off.

Above them, JW flew to and fro, announcing the great news to all the creatures of the Great Swamp. Ssserek could only smile as Delph and

Buttons traded jokes. If JW had appeared to play a slightly greater-than-great role in the whole affair, why not? He deserved it.

Soon, they were approaching Brokenleaf Beach upon which Sally was now resting among Sara and those who came with her. It would be several weeks before she could again roam the field and forest. It was Iggy who spotted the snake and alligator with Buttons sound asleep between Delph's eye knobs as he wandered toward the beach.

He had turned to watch Sara as she spoke with his friends. Normally, the small squirrel would have been miffed, if not outright jealous, at such a sight. Not now. He felt so happy seeing her again. His heart was full of her as he rambled down the beech. Spotting JW who stood watch alone at water's edge, Iggy strolled up, and leaning against the highly surprised crow, murmured, "Some day, old friend, huh?"

JW only nodded. He wanted to say something that would put the impudent scamp in his place. Instead, he simply nodded, "Indeed, indeed!"

The End